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AUTHOR Roderick, Melissa; Bryk, Anthony S.; Jacob, Brian A.; Easton, John Q.; Allensworth, Elaine

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ABSTRACT

In 1996, the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) began an initiative aimed at ending social promotion and raising achievement. The centerpiece of the initiative is a set of test-score cutoffs for third, sixth, and eighth graders, who must achieve a minimum score on standardized reading and mathematics tests to be promoted to the next grade. Students who do not meet the criteria are required to attend a special summer school program, Summer Bridge. Those who fail again are retained in their grade or, if they are 15, are sent to new alternative schools called Transition Centers. This report describes results from the first 2 years of the initiative and identifies many important issues that merit further study. Compared are the performance of students subject to the policy in 1997 and 1998 with that of a previous group of CPS students not subject to the criteria. There have been impressive increases in the number of students who meet the minimum test score cutoffs for promotion. The performance of students with low skills shows the greatest improvement, but the picture is mixed on whether getting students up to a test-score cutoff in one year allows them to do better the next year. Large test score increases in Summer Bridge were not followed by improved performance the next year. Results from the first group of retained students are also not encouraging. Chicago has not solved the problem of poor performance among those who did not meet the minimum score cutoffs. Research steps to examine the effects of the program further are outlined. An appendix contains some detailed test results for first-time test takers. (Contains 25 figures, 38 endnotes, and 26 references.) (SLD)

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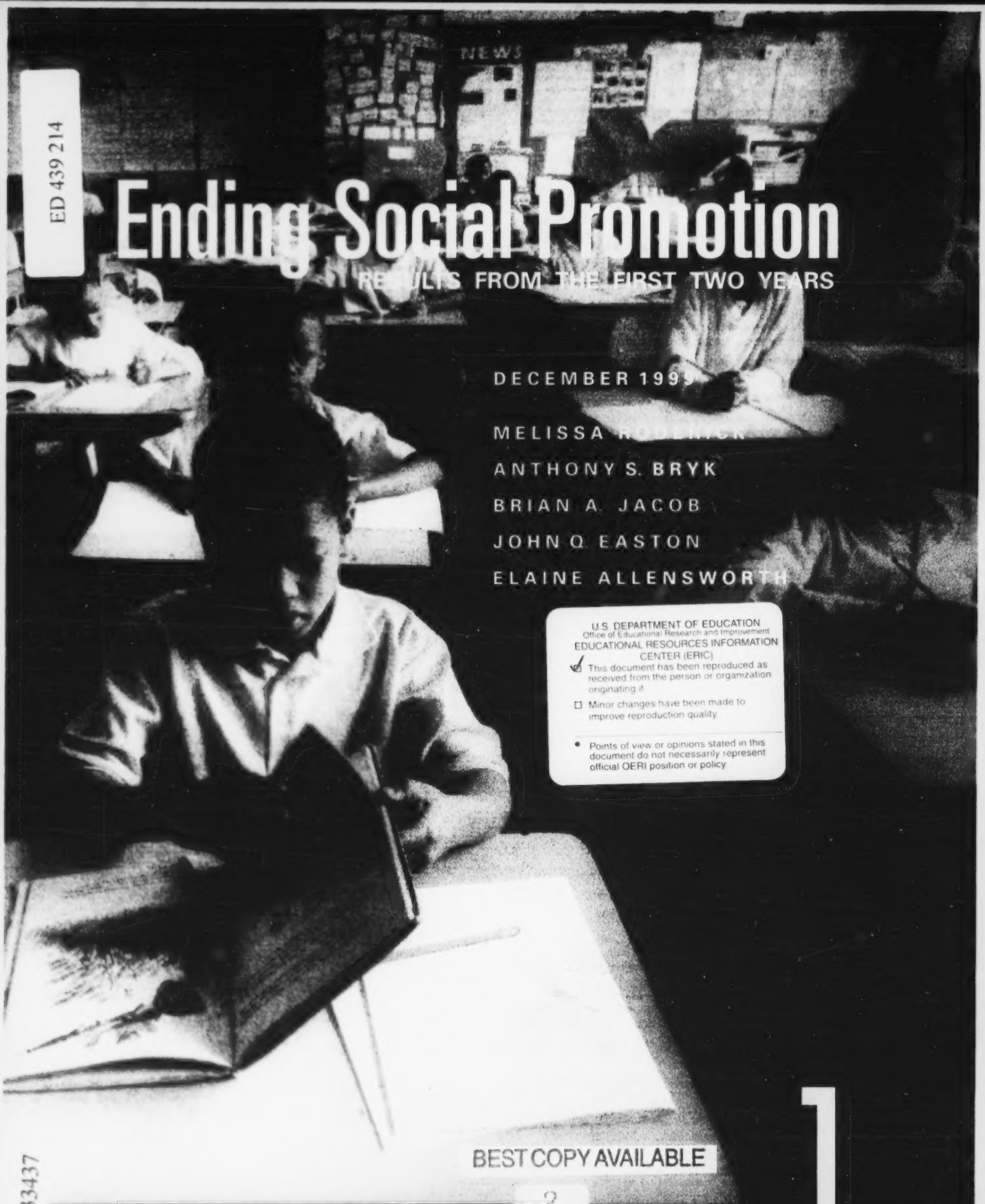

Ending Social Promotion

RESULTS FROM THE FIRST TWO YEARS

DECEMBER 199

MELISSA
ANTHONY S. BRYK
BRIAN A. JACOB
JOHN Q. EASTON
ELAINE ALLENSWORTH

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CHARTING REFORM IN CHICAGO SERIES
CONSORTIUM ON CHICAGO SCHOOL RESEARCH

Pictured is Keith Collins, then a student at William E. Gladstone Elementary School. Keith currently attends John M. Smyth Elementary School.

Ending Social Promotion:

Results from the First Two Years

DECEMBER 1999

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INTRODUCTION

In 1996, the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) began an ambitious new initiative aimed at ending social promotion and raising achievement.[1] The centerpiece of this initiative is a set of promotional test-score cutoffs for third, sixth, and eighth graders. Students in these grades must achieve a minimum score on a standardized test in reading and mathematics in order to be promoted to the next grade. Students who do not meet the criteria are required to participate in a special summer school program, Summer Bridge, and retake the test at the end of the summer. Those who fail again are retained in their grade or, if they are 15, are sent to new alternative schools called Transition Centers. In the first two years under the policy, more than one-third of third, sixth, and eighth graders failed to meet the promotional test cutoffs by the end of the school year. Of these, more than 22,000 students attended Summer Bridge. At the end of the summer, 10,000 of them met the test criteria and were promoted. In both 1997 and 1998, CPS retained 20 percent of eligible third graders and approximately 10 percent of sixth and eighth grade students. In 1998, almost 1,600 students were retained for a second time.

It is not an overstatement to say that all eyes are on Chicago. CPS's efforts have spurred a wave of similar reforms in school systems around the country, and the "hazards of social promotion" have become a mantra in political speeches. President Clinton heralded this initiative in his 1999 State of the Union Address, arguing:

> *When we promote a child from grade to grade who hasn't mastered the work, we do that child no favors. It is time to end social promotion in America's schools. Last year in Chicago, they made that decision. . . .I propose to help other communities follow Chicago's lead.*

Many educators criticize Chicago's policy, however, for focusing on simplistic solutions and particularly for relying on a practice—grade retention—that has not been shown to lead to higher achievement. Robert Hauser, chair of a National Research Council panel on the appropriate

use of testing, argued passionately that the preponderance of evidence shows negative consequences of retaining students:

> *We should know that a new policy works before we try it out on a large scale. In its plan to end social promotion, the [national] administration appears to have mixed a number of fine proposals for educational reform with an enforcement provision—flunking kids by the carload lot—about which the great mass of evidence is strongly negative. And this policy will hurt poor and minority children most of all.*[2]

In addition, the Chicago policy is criticized because the practice of making promotional decisions based on a one-time test score is inconsistent with professional standards.[3] (See Sidebar on page 5.) A panel of the National Research Council recently came out strongly against the sole use of test scores for making promotional decisions, taking the stand that high stakes testing should occur only after instructional changes have been made.[4]

Given the rhetoric and attention surrounding this initiative, it is critical that public debate be informed by an understanding of what the Chicago policy actually is and the best available evidence of its effects on student achievement, student progress, and on instruction. This is the first in a series of reports the Consortium on Chicago School Research will produce over the next several years as part of a larger multi-year study of the effect of Chicago's promotion policies on students' opportunities to learn and on their long-range school outcomes. This first report describes the implementation of the policy during the first two years and the major processes at work. It tracks the flows of students through the policy, compares the progress of students who faced the promotional test cutoffs in 1997 and 1998 with that of a group of students before the policy, and examines how students' experiences vary by race and gender. Subsequent reports will evaluate more specifically the nature of achievement effects associated with the policy for different groups of students over time.

In the process of describing results from the first two years, this report identifies many important questions and areas of concern that merit future investigation. We have already begun work on some of these. An important purpose in releasing this first report is to stimulate further public conversation about these efforts. In so doing, we expect to identify more important questions that will help shape our continuing research agenda on this important policy initiative.

A Theory of Action: What Is Chicago's Effort to End Social Promotion?

The CPS policy was enacted to address two concerns: First, students were having difficulty in later grades, particularly in high school, because they had been allowed to progress through elementary school without attaining even minimum levels of basic skills. The second concern was raised by teachers: How could they pursue higher standards or be accountable for poor student performance if students did not have the skills to move on to more advanced material?

The CPS initiative aims to address these problems through a combination of efforts— during the testing year, over the summer, and during the retention year—designed to raise students' skills to meet minimum test scores on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS) before they are promoted. First, in the year before promotion, the policy seeks to use the threat of retention as an incentive to motivate students to work harder and to encourage parents to monitor their children's performance more closely. The policy aims to focus teacher attention on those students who are not mastering the material and send a strong message to cover material that will raise students' skills. In addition, students who are at risk are given extended instructional time during the school year through Lighthouse, an after-school program that began in 1997 and was expanded in 1998. Lighthouse provides schools with funds to ex-

tend the school day and a centrally developed curriculum focused on reading and mathematics.

The second major component of the policy is the Summer Bridge program, which provides additional, more focused, instructional time and a second chance to pass the test cutoff during the summer. This much heralded program offers smaller classes and a centrally mandated curriculum aligned with the format and content of the ITBS.

And, third, the policy uses the practice of grade retention and directs even more resources in the retained year in an effort to get students back on track. Schools with high proportions of retained students have been given extra teachers and reduced class sizes. Retained students are also required to participate in the Lighthouse after-school program. In addition, CPS is experimenting with a range of additional policy strategies, including retesting mid-year (January) so that retained students who then pass the test cutoff can rejoin their classmates.[5] In total, the policy combines high stakes testing with multiple chances to reach the minimum ITBS score and progressively targeted intervention, all aimed at improving the achievement of students with the lowest skills.

What Are the Benefits and Costs of the Policy?

Proponents of such initiatives argue that raising students' basic skills before they are allowed to move on to the next grade is essential for long-term school success. While low-achieving students should benefit the most, all students will benefit because they will receive more focused instruction and will be in classrooms where students are working harder and are on task. The policy also seeks to address educators' concerns that social promotion hampers the ability to teach grade-appropriate material. By ensuring that students have the prerequisite basic skills to tackle more challenging material, the policy attempts to allay this fear. Thus, all students should benefit because their teachers in later grades will be able to pursue more advanced objectives and use more grade-appropriate content.

Critics of the policy worry about three potential negative effects. First, critics worry that the policy encourages too great a focus on test preparation and basic skills drills and leads teachers to limit content coverage, slowing down rather than increasing the pace of instruction in the testing years. Second, critics argue that the practice of retaining students has not been shown to produce increases in achievement, even with remediation.[6] They also note that research evidence suggests that retention has long-term negative effects on students' self-esteem and school attachment and is associated with higher dropout rates.[7] Thus, retention and the placement of students in Transition Centers may benefit those who are promoted, while creating sacrificial lambs of the most vulnerable Chicago students. And third, critics of the policy worry that linking decisions to a single test score creates pressure that might result in cheating or might lead well-intentioned educators to try to protect students who are at risk by placing them in special education or retaining them earlier. Many teachers believe that retaining students in earlier grades is better than retention in later grades, but this practice has not been shown to have positive results.[8]

Previous policy initiatives similar to Chicago's have not had a successful track record in this respect. In the early 1980s, New York City engaged in a similar effort, giving students who did not meet a "promotional gate" extra summer resources and reduced class sizes. In an evaluation of the New York initiative, Ernest House found that students who had been retained under the policy had similar test scores in post-promotional gate grades to a matched group of low-performing students who had been socially promoted before the policy.[9] He concluded that retention and extra resources provided no benefit to these students. House found, moreover, that retained students dropped out at significantly higher rates (40 versus 25 percent) than the matched group of previously promoted, low-achieving students.

In taking on social promotion, Chicago is attempting to confront one of the most persistent problems in

education. How can we address consistently poor performance among urban students and in urban schools? On the one hand, sending students with low skills into high school and into the labor market sets them up for failure. On the other hand, the most commonly employed alternative, grade retention, may be as problematic or even worse. All of this suggests that Chicago is facing a tall order in using the threat of retention as a means to motivate students and teachers, while at the same time using retention itself as a means to remediate poor performance.

Chicago's approach is not a single policy but more of an integrated set of initiatives focusing attention on the poorest performing students . . .

Unfortunately, there is little research to support or negate the central premise of the promotional initiative in Chicago—that setting minimum test-score cutoffs for students will lead to more focused instruction and higher achievement, and will lay the basis for long-term school success.[10] Prior studies have focused almost exclusively on the impact of retention. We know little about whether the introduction of high stakes testing, with linked support efforts such as Summer Bridge and Lighthouse, will affect greater learning gains for students who are promoted. Nor do we know whether reducing the spread of achievement in post-promotional grades will lead teachers to pursue more difficult content and skills coverage.

Past research clearly supports the CPS policy in one area–greater instructional time has positive effects, particularly when it is positioned during the summer.[11] Multiple studies document that impoverished students lose ground during the summer months and that this "summer learning loss" may be an important reason why poor children fall behind their more advantaged counterparts.[12]

The Current Study

Ending social promotion is a much more complex undertaking than might at first be imagined. Chicago's approach is not a single policy but more of an integrated set of initiatives focusing attention on the poorest performing students during the school year before testing, over the summer, and in the year after retention. Clearly, some components of the policy may work more effectively than others for different groups of students. They also require varying levels of resources. This report and those that follow will focus in more detail on untangling the web of effects associated with each of the components of this initiative.

We will also be looking at changes in the policy over time and evaluating how such changes shape the policy's impact. It is important to recognize that CPS's policy has been evolving. For example, the administration argues that the sole use of test scores in the first years of the policy was intended to set a "gold standard" in a school system where grades had lost their meaning as indicators of student knowledge. Three years after implementation, Chicago has decided to raise the minimum test score needed for promotion in all three grades.[13] At the same time, the CPS administration has stated that the criteria for promotion will be expanded to include grades, attendance, and learning growth over the school year. Similarly, the administration has added new program components, such as expanding Summer Bridge to first and second graders who have ITBS scores below grade level. Existing components may also be modified over time. Clearly, tracking the implementation and effect of these changes will be an important focus of future work.

Sidebar 1

Why Do Testing Experts Oppose the Use of Single Test Scores in Making Promotional Decisions? Issues in Use of Cut-Scores for Retention Decisions

Major professional organizations concerned with testing, including the American Psychological Association, the National Council on Measurement in Education, and the American Educational Research Association, have all taken stands opposing the use of a single test score in making promotional decisions. Test publishers note in their technical documentation that it is inappropriate to use test scores, taken alone, for deciding whether to retain students. A recent report of the National Research Council on high stakes testing concluded:

> *Scores from large-scale assessments should never be the only sources of information used to make a promotion or retention decision. No single source of information—whether test scores, course grades, or teacher judgments—should stand alone in making promotion decisions. Test scores should always be used in combination with other sources of information about student achievement.*[1]

The Consortium's own work confirms these conclusions. In the fall of 1998, the Consortium released a major report on Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS) score trends in Chicago and the increased use of these data in a new high stakes accountability environment.[2] Many of the issues raised in this report have implications for the current promotional policy, which requires reaching particular test scores for promotion to the next grade.

Why do experts take such a strong stand against using single test scores? The reason is that testing is an imprecise science. There are two forms of imprecision on the ITBS: differences in content and difficulty from form to form and numerous distinctions that are being made based on a small amount of information.

First, CPS sets a minimum test score in Grade Equivalents (GEs) for promotion at grades three, six, and eight. The system currently employs several different forms of the ITBS, which it administers at different times. Since each form and level of the test produces GEs, one might easily think that these results are equivalent and directly comparable. In fact, the Consortium's study showed that they are not. Rather, the Grade Equivalent metric is form- and level-specific; consequently, results are not strictly comparable across different forms and levels. This is not a problem for the purpose for which the test was originally intended—to get a quick comparison of student performance relative to a national sample that took the exact same test. It is a problem, however, when we seek to establish a GE score as a minimum standard. Since different forms of the ITBS are administered from year to year (and each has a somewhat different set of GEs), students actually confront varying degrees of risk of failure depending upon the particular test form used that year.

Second, test scores are imprecise because there are only a set number of questions on a test and many possible GE cutoffs. For example, in Form M, used in both 1997 and 1999, there are only 48 reading questions on the eighth-grade test but the GE range spans from a low of 1.9 to a high of 16.3. If all of the Grade Equivalents in this range were possible, the test would be making 134 distinctions on the basis of 48 questions—clearly an impossibility. As a result, there are many test scores that are simply impossible to obtain on the ITBS. On Form M, for example, a student can either receive a 6.9 or, if they got one more item correct, a 7.3. Scores from 7.0 to 7.2 don't exist on the eighth grade Form M reading test. It is not unusual that getting just one more item correct can make a difference of .3 to .4 GEs.

Test makers take these problems into account by using a concept called the *standard error of measurement*. The standard error of measurement associated with an individual's test score tells us how precise the individual score report actually is. For the upper grades on the ITBS, the standard errors of measurement in GEs are quite large. For example, the CPS established a cut-score of 7.4 GEs for graduation from eighth grade. The standard error of measurement, based on the Level 14 test used in 1998, is almost 0.9 GEs for a student who is at national norms (i.e., 8.8 GEs for an eighth grader). This means that it is quite plausible for this student to produce a test score that ranges anywhere from 7.0, falling below the cutoff for promotion, to 10.6 GEs, almost two years above grade level. (Formally, this is called a 95 percent probability interval—a range of two standard errors in either direction of a particular score).[3]

Finally, the ITBS is not aligned with either the Chicago Academic Standards or the Illinois Learning Standards. As a result, the specific competencies required for promotion are not publicly stated.

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[1] Heubert and Hauser (1999), p. 286.

[2] Bryk, Thum, Easton, and Luppescu (1998).

[3] See Rogosa (1999).

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SECTION 1

Flows through the Policy

What does it mean to end social promotion in a school system the size of Chicago's? This section looks at the aggregate statistics for the first two years of the policy regarding how many students were retained, promoted, or met the minimum test-score cutoff for promotion. These numbers reflect a series of important outcomes at each stage of the process—the effectiveness of efforts to raise test scores during the school year, the effect of the second chance in Summer Bridge, and the effect of efforts in the following year to address poor performance among retained students. In addition, these statistics reflect the impact of administrative decisions about which students are included in the policy and whether students who do not meet the cutoff are promoted anyway.

Results for the First Year, 1996-1997

Who Was Subject to the Policy?

Main finding: *Thirty-one percent of third graders and 20 percent of sixth and eighth graders were not subject to the policy. For third graders, participation in bilingual education was the primary reason for exclusion. For sixth and eighth graders, classification in special education programs was the primary reason for exclusion.*

The first decision a school system faces in trying to end social promotion is determining which students to include in the policy. The CPS decided to focus its efforts in the third, sixth, and eighth grades. In prior years, these were the grades for a state-administered test, the Illinois Goal Assessment Program (IGAP). In 1997, CPS decided that the promotional decisions for

Figure 1-1

Summary Table: Students Excluded from the Test Score Cutoff in May 1997

		Reason for Exclusion among Those Tested						
	Excluded because not tested[1]	Special education	Bilingual	Special education and bilingual	Unknown	**Total tested but excluded**	**Total excluded**	**Percent of first time students in grade excluded**[2]
Third	**6,631**	2,100	1,604	248	49	**4,001**	**10,632**	**31%**
Sixth	**2,012**	3,233	381	394	40	**4,048**	**6,060**	**19%**
Eighth	**2,112**	3,156	354	325	33	**3,868**	**5,980**	**21%**

[1] Students "excluded but not tested" did not take the ITBS because of their bilingual or special education status or were tested in Spanish. Most third graders not tested were in bilingual classes. Other excluded students took the ITBS, but fell under one of the two exclusion criteria.

[2] First time students are those who spend one year in third, sixth, or eighth grade, thus excluding retained students.

two groups of students in these grades would not be made solely on the basis of scores on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS)—students who were in bilingual education fewer than three years and students who were in graded special education classrooms.[14] Some of these students were not tested—largely because of their limited proficiency in English—while others were tested but fell under one of the exclusion criteria. In this report, we call both students who weren't tested and those whose tests were excluded from the policy *excluded students* (see Figure 1-1). We call students in these grades *included* if they were tested and their promotional decisions were made on the basis of their ITBS scores.

See the Consortium's web page for an executive summary of this report: http://www.consortium-chicago.org

Figures 1-2, 1-3, and 1-4 (on pages 10 - 15) show the numbers of first time third, sixth, and eighth graders who were excluded in 1997. The decision to exclude students who were in bilingual classrooms for fewer than three years meant that many third graders were excluded for that reason. As students move through grades, special education placements rise, and the proportion of students who have been in bilingual education for fewer than three years falls. This meant that about 80 percent of sixth and eighth graders were included under the policy, whereas less than 70 percent of third graders were included. As seen in Figure 1-1, among those students who were excluded, most sixth and eighth graders were excluded because of their special education status. (Section 1 continues on page 16.)

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Sidebar 2

Students Who Fail in Both Subjects Make Up the Majority of Retained Students

One of the reasons that third graders had lower passing rates is that third graders were much more likely to be behind in both reading and mathematics. Over half of third graders who failed to meet the minimum cutoff in May 1997 were below 2.8 in both reading and mathematics. Students who failed in both subjects had a hard time bringing their scores up in Summer Bridge. Less than 20 percent of students who had to attend Summer Bridge to raise their test scores in both reading and mathematics managed to meet the test cutoff in both subjects by the end of the summer, regardless of whether they were third, sixth, or eighth graders. In comparison, about half of students who needed to raise their test scores in only one subject managed to accomplish that by the end of the summer.

Students who failed in both subjects differed in several respects. First, these students started farther behind. The average third grade reading score for students who failed only reading was 2.22 in May 1997, compared to 1.84 for third graders who failed both subjects. Similar differences were also observed for sixth and eighth graders who failed both subjects.

Second, many more of these students were not tested at the end of the summer, suggesting that they had not participated in Summer Bridge. Almost 20 percent of third, sixth, and eighth grade students who failed to meet the test cutoff in both subjects in May were not retested in August compared to 10 percent of third graders and 13 percent of sixth and eighth graders who failed in reading only.

And, finally, this group of students who missed the cutoff in both subjects had smaller testing gains in Summer Bridge than did students who failed only one subject. Smaller testing gains in Summer Bridge among this group may reflect both the fact that they started farther behind and that trying to pass two subjects in one summer is difficult. In addition, these lower passing rates may signify motivational or other difficulties.

A better understanding of the characteristics of this group of students is important, as they make up the majority of those who are retained. Indeed, 71 percent of third graders who were retained came from the group of students who failed to reach the test cutoff in both reading and mathematics in May. We will be examining these issues more closely in further research.

Reasons for Not Meeting the Cutoff for Promotion in May 1997, and End of Summer Results

	Failed Reading[1]		Failed Math		Failed both Reading and Math		Total
		% total		% total		% total	
Grade 3							
Did not meet cutoff in May	3,988	36%	1,527	14%	5,650	51%	11,165
Did not meet cutoff by August	2,091		423		4,677		7,191
Proportion did not meet cutoff by August	52%		28%		83%		64%
Retained/transition center	1,195	25%	190	4%	3,411	71%	4,796
Grade 6							
Did not meet cutoff in May	4,219	50%	1,234	15%	2,979	35%	8,432
Did not meet cutoff by August	1,857		591		2,489		4,937
Proportion did not meet cutoff by August	44%		48%		83%		58%
Retained/transition Center	1,099	36%	311	10%	1,629	53%	3,039
Grade 8							
Did not meet cutoff in May	2,688	46%	1,192	20%	1,959	34%	5,819
Did not meet cutoff by August	1,324		611		1,582		3,517
Proportion did not meet cutoff by August	50%		51%		81%		61%
Retained/transition center	863	37%	243	11%	1,182	52%	2,288

[1] "Failed" means that students' test score in that subject did not meet the promotional cutoff–2.8 for third graders, 5.3 for sixth graders, and 7.0 for eighth graders.

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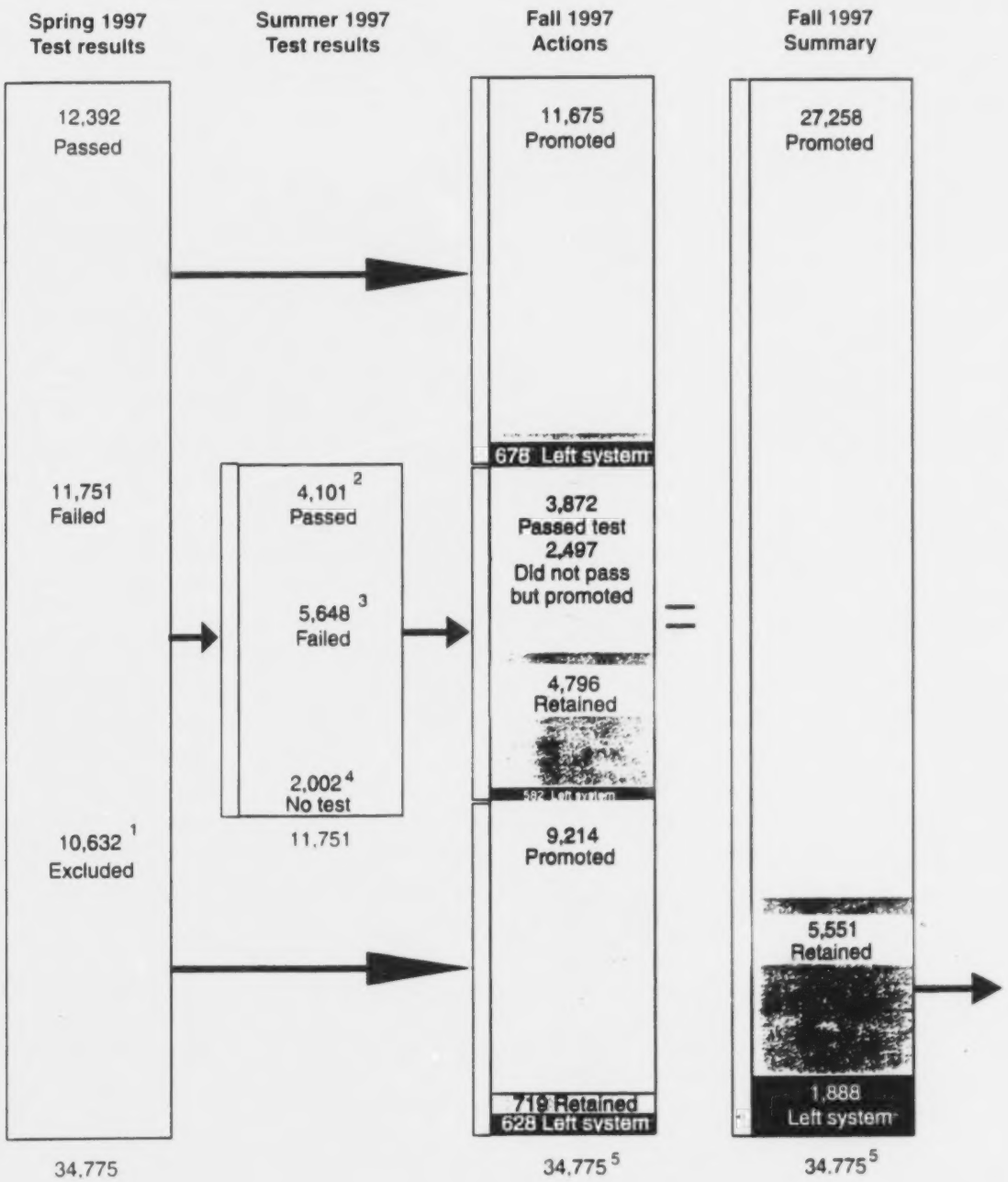
Figure 1-2

1997-1998 Test and Retention Results
All 3rd Graders in Spring 1997



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1997-1998 Test and Retention Results
All 3rd Graders in Spring 1997
Details

[1] The excluded category includes students who took the test, but whose scores were excluded from reporting, and students who did not take the test. Of those students who took the test, the test scores of 4,001 students were excluded from reporting. Of these, 1,600 were bilingual and 2,149 were special education students. An additional 6,631 students did not take the test, perhaps because of special education or bilingual status.

[2] 3,872 of the 4,101 students who passed the Summer Bridge ITBS were promoted, 102 were retained for reasons other than failing the test (e.g., poor attendance), and 127 left the system.

[3] 1,855 of the 5,648 students who failed Summer Bridge were waived and promoted, 3,602 were retained, 189 left the sysiem, and 2 moved into non-graded special education.

[4] 642 of the 2,002 students who did not take the test in Summer Bridge were promoted, 1,092 were retained, 266 left the system, and 2 moved into non-graded special education.

[5] The numbers in this column do not add up to exactly 34,775 because 78 students moved into non-graded special education between the two semesters.

[6] The numbers in this column do not add up to exactly 5,551 for the following reasons: 1) 205 of the retained 3rd graders were enrolled in the fall semester, but were not enrolled in the system the following spring semester when the test was re-taken; 2) 189 of the retained 3rd graders were promoted to 4th grade between the fall and spring semesters; 3) 7 of the students moved into non-graded special education between the fall and spring semesters; and 4) 45 of the students were reclassified into a grade other than 3rd or 4th between the fall and spring semesters - demoted to 1st or 2nd grade, or promoted to 5th or 6th grade. In some cases this was most likely a recording error in the school records. The numbers in this figure trace those 5,105 students that were classified as repeat 3rd graders in fall 1998.

[7] The test scores of 715 students were excluded from reporting. Of these, 162 were bilingual, 512 were special education, and 41 were both bilingual and special education students. An additional 261 students did not take the test, perhaps because of special education or bilingual status.

[8] 573 of the 617 students who passed Summer Bridge 1998 were promoted, 26 were retained, and 18 left the system.

[9] 365 of the 1,169 students who failed summer Bridge were promoted, 754 were retained, 49 left the system, and 1 was reclassified as non-graded special education.

[10] 276 of the 579 students who did not take the test at Summer Bridge were promoted, 249 were retained, 48 left the system, and 6 were reclassified as non-graded special education.

[11] The numbers in this column do not add up to exactly 5,551 for the reasons listed in Footnote 6, and because 17 students moved into non-graded special education between the two semesters.

Retained 3rd Graders in Spring 1998

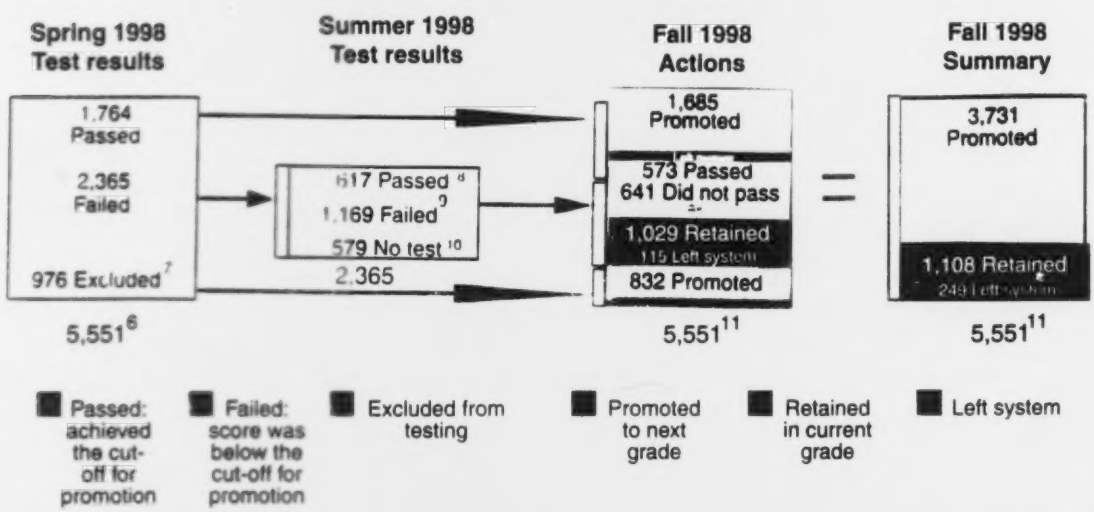

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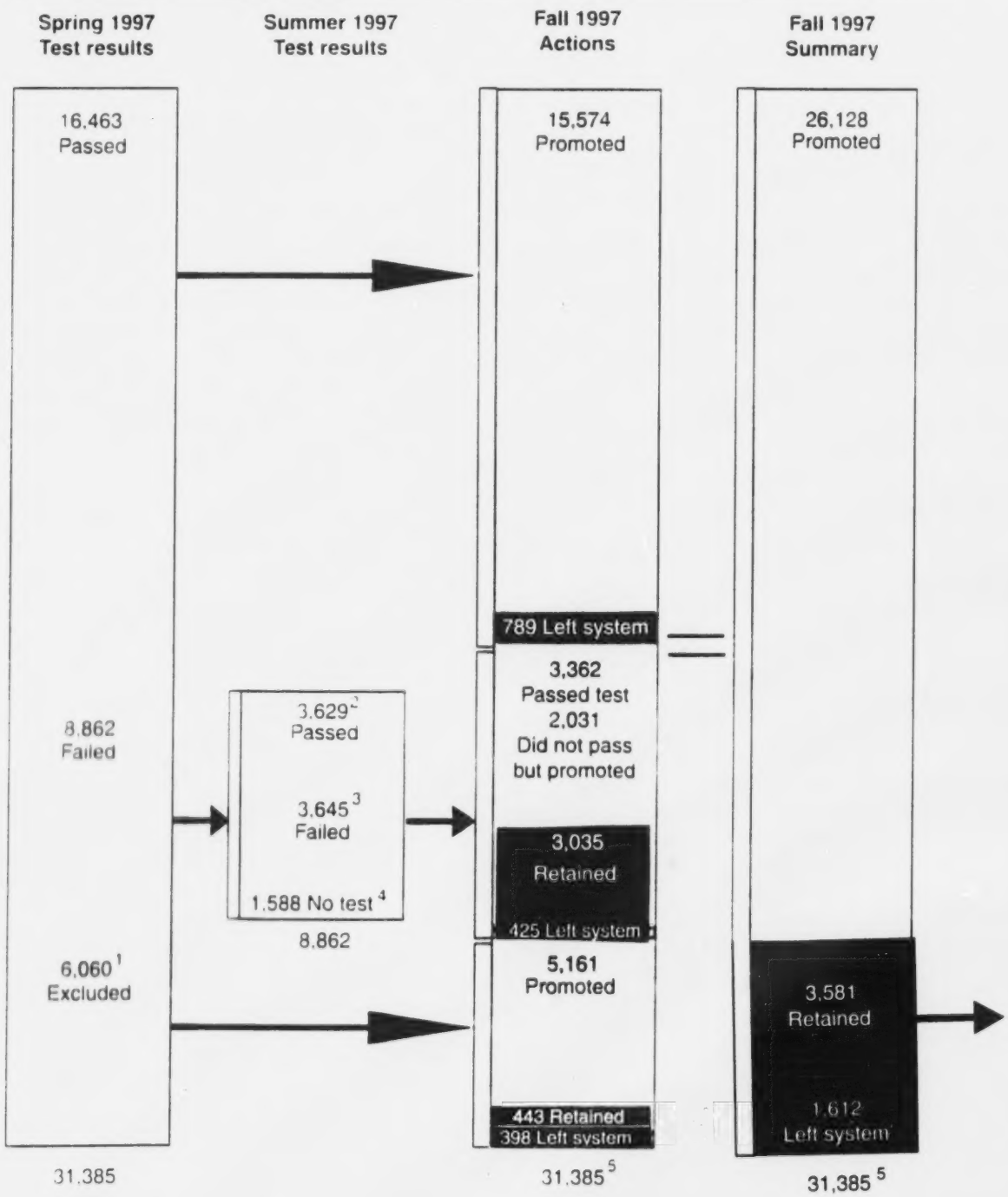
Figure 1-3

1997-1998 Test and Retention Results

All 6th Graders in Spring 1997



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1997-1998 Test and Retention Results

All 6th Graders in Spring 1997

Details

[1] The excluded category includes students who took the test, but whose scores were excluded from reporting, and students who did not take the test. Of those students who took the test, the test scores of 4,048 students were excluded from reporting. Of these, 378 were bilingual, 3,637 were special education, and 33 were both bilingual and special education students. An additional 2,012 students did not take the test, perhaps because of special education or bilingual status.

[2] 3,362 of the 3,629 students who passed Summer Bridge were promoted, 131 were retained, 134 left the system, and 2 entered Transition Centers.

[3] 1,200 of the 3,645 students who failed Summer Bridge were promoted, 2,324 were retained, 118 left the system, 2 moved into non-graded special education, and 1 entered a Transition Center.

[4] 831 of the 1,588 students who did not take the test in Summer Bridge were promoted, 580 were retained, 173 left the system, 3 moved into non-graded special education, and 1 entered a Transition Center.

[5] The numbers in this column do not add up to 31,385 because 64 students moved into non-graded special education between two semesters.

[6] The numbers in this column do not add up to exactly 3,581 for the following reasons: 1) 141 of the retained 6th graders were enrolled in the fall semester, but were not enrolled in the system the following spring semester when the test was re-taken; 2) 8 of the students moved into non-graded special education between the fall and spring semesters; 3) 192 of the students were promoted mid-year to 7th grade; and 4) 14 students were reclassified into a grade other than 6th or 7th between the fall and spring semesters. In some cases this was most likely a recording error in the school records. This figure traces those 3,226 students that were reclassified as repeat 6th graders in fall 1998.

[7] The test scores of 426 students were excluded from reporting. Of these, 9 were bilingual, 416 were special education, and 1 was both bilingual and special education. An additional 155 students did not take the test, perhaps because of special or bilingual status.

[8] 451 of the 484 students who passed Summer Bridge 1998 were promoted, 16 were retained, 13 left the system, and 4 entered Transition Centers.

[9] 207 of the 553 students who failed Summer Bridge were promoted, 319 were retained, 21 left the system, and 6 moved into Transition Centers.

[10] 235 of the 404 students who did not take the test at Summer Bridge were promoted, 124 were retained, 41 left the system, 1 was reclassified as non-graded special education, and 3 moved into Transition Centers.

[11] The numbers in this column do not add up to exactly 3,581 for the reasons listed in Footnote 6, and because 10 students were reclassified into non-graded special education between the two semesters.

Retained 6th Graders in Spring 1998

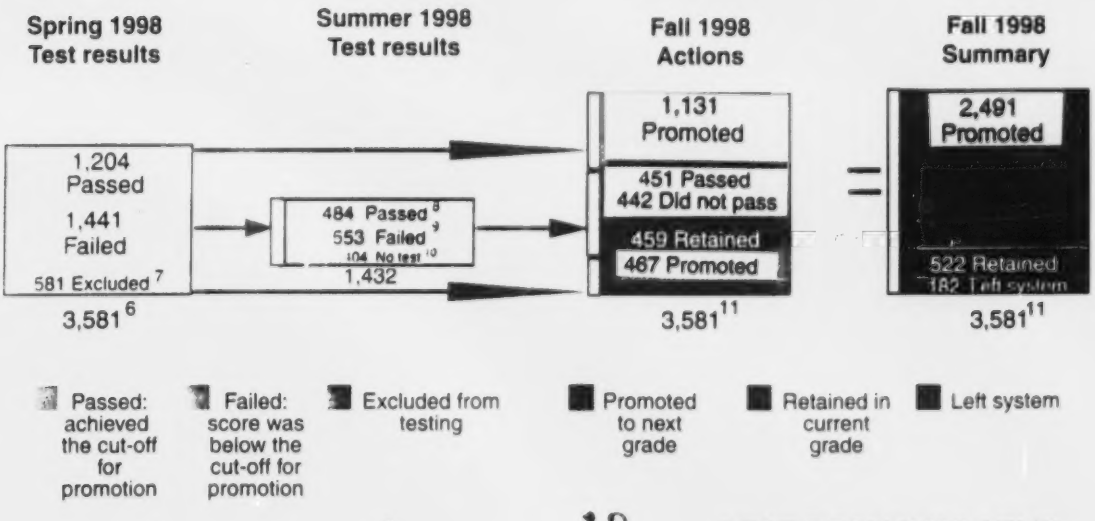

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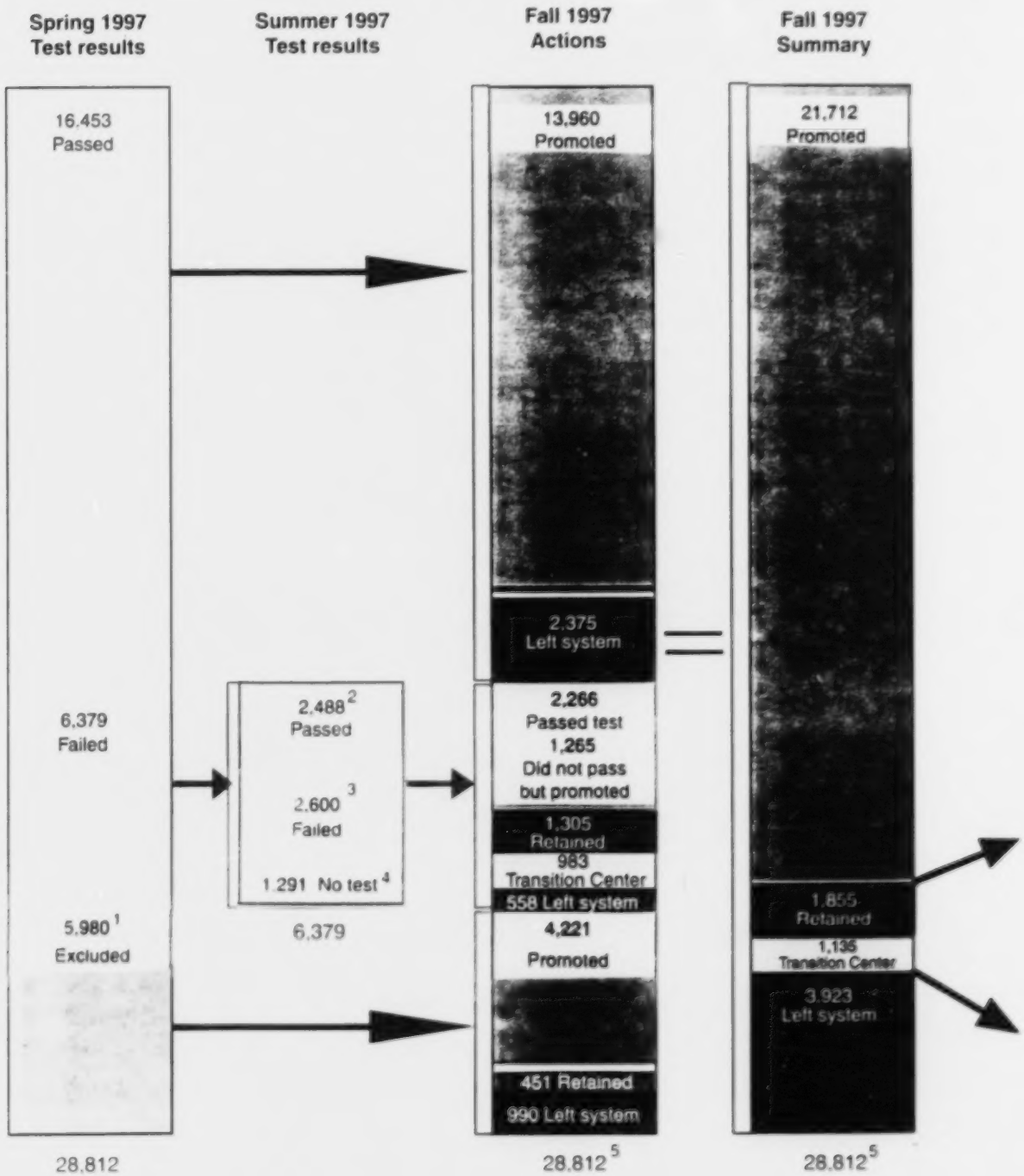
Figure 1-4

1997-1998 Test and Retention Results
All 8th Graders in Spring 1997



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1997-1998 Test and Retention Results
All 8th Graders in Spring 1997
Details

[1] The excluded category includes students who took the test, but whose scores were excluded from reporting, and students who did not take the test. Of those students who took the test, the test scores of 3,868 students were excluded from reporting. Of these, 353 were bilingual, 3,491 were special education, and 24 were both bilingual and special education students. An additional 2,112 students did not take the test, perhaps because of special education or bilingual status.

[2] 2,266 of the 2,488 students who passed the Summer Bridge ITBS were promoted, 31 were retained, 185 left the system, 1 moved into non-graded special education, and 5 entered Transition Centers.

[3] 638 of the 2,600 students who failed Summer Bridge were waived and promoted, 1,046 were retained, 144 left the system, and 772 entered Transition Centers.

[4] 627 of the 1,291 students who did not take the test in summer Bridge were promoted, 228 were retained, 229 left the system, 1 moved into non-graded special education, and 206 entered Transition Centers.

[5] The numbers in this column do not add up to exactly 28,812 because 187 students moved into non-graded special education between the two semesters.

[6] The test scores of 192 students were excluded from reporting. Of these, 5 were bilingual, 187 were special education, and none were both bilingual and special education students. An additional 478 students did not take the test, perhaps because of special education or bilingual status.

[7] These students were no longer active 8th graders by spring 1998.

[8] 84 students were promoted to 9th grade in January. 6 of those 84 students had passed a retest, 62 did not take the test, and 16 failed the test. While 224 8th graders met the standard in January 1998, all but 6 of these students remained in Transition Centers or elementary schools until the following fall.

[9] The numbers in this column do not add up to exactly 2,990 because 26 students were reclassified into a grade other than 8th or 9th between the fall and spring semesters, perhaps due to a recording error in the schools. The numbers in this column trace those 2,964 students who were coded as retained 8th grade or Transition Center students in fall 1998.

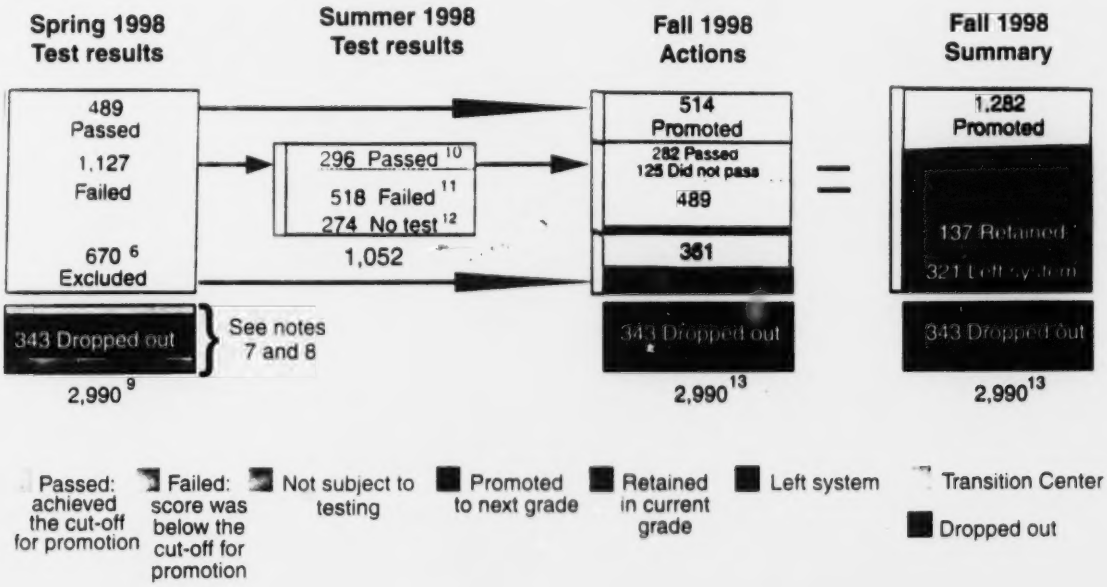
[10] 282 of the 296 students who passed Summer Bridge 1998 were promoted, 5 were retained, and 13 left the system, and 1 entered a Transition Center.

[11] 38 of the 518 students who failed Summer Bridge were promoted, 7 were retained, 18 left the system, 411 moved into Transition Centers.

[12] 87 of the 274 students who did not take the test at Summer Bridge were promoted, 12 were retained, 97 left the system, 1 was reclassified as non-graded special education, and 77 moved into Transition Centers.

[13] The numbers in this column do not add up to exactly 2,990 for the reasons listed in Footnote 6, and because 23 of the students moved into non-graded special education by fall 1998, and 96 students were no longer classified as 8th graders or Transition Center students in spring 1998.

Retained 8th Graders in Spring 1998



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How Many Students Made the Test Cutoff by May 1997?

Main finding: *Of the students who were included under the policy, half of third graders, 65 percent of sixth graders, and 72 percent of eighth graders met the promotional criteria in May 1997.*

The first component of CPS's effort to end social promotion is that students in the third, sixth, and eighth grades had to reach a minimum test score in both mathematics and reading by May, when testing occurred, or they were required to participate in Summer Bridge. The promotional criteria were based on students' ITBS scores, reported in Grade Equivalents (GEs) according to national norms. Since testing occurred in early May, eight months after the beginning of the school year, a student who is testing at national norms would receive a score of their grade plus eight months. Thus, a third grader is at national norms in May if his or her ITBS score is 3.8. The minimum test-score cutoff for third graders was set at 2.8, one year below grade level. As seen in the first column of Figure 1-2, in 1997 only half of included third graders met that minimum test score in both reading and mathematics by the end of the school year.

Students in the sixth and eighth grades faced more lenient cutoff points. In 1997, sixth graders needed to reach a 5.3 in reading and mathematics, a year and a half below grade level, to be promoted. Eighth graders needed to achieve a test-score minimum of 7.0, which is 1.8 years below grade level, in order to be promoted. The cutoff for promotion in eighth grade was increased to 7.2 in 1998, and to 7.4 in 1999.

How Many Students Attended Summer Bridge and Passed the Promotional Criteria?

Main finding: *In 1997, more than 80 percent of students who failed the promotional criteria during the school year attended Summer Bridge and were retested at the end of the summer. More than one-third of third graders and approximately 40 percent of sixth and eighth graders who failed the promotional criteria in May passed in August 1997. Thus, by the end of August, 68 percent of third graders, 79 percent of sixth grades and fully 83 percent of eighth graders had met the minimum cutoff and were promoted to the next grade.*[15]

The second component of CPS's efforts is a mandatory Summer Bridge program for students who do not meet the promotional criteria during the regular school year. Summer Bridge provides these students with a second chance to meet the test cutoff and be promoted to the next grade. At the end of the Summer Bridge program, students are subject to the same promotional criteria as during the school year. In 1997, approximately 27,000 students in the third, sixth, and eighth grades who were included under the policy failed to meet the test cutoff in both subjects. Of those, 22,111 were then retested at the end of the summer. The second columns in Figures 1-2, 1-3, and 1-4 show the results for students who participated in Summer Bridge.

The second chance in Summer Bridge substantially raised the proportion of students who ultimately met the promotional test cutoff in both subjects. As documented in Figure 1-2, 51 percent of included third graders met the promotional criteria in May 1997, and an additional 17 percent did so over the course of the summer, so that 68 percent of included third graders met the test cutoff for promotion before entering the fourth grade. Among sixth graders, the proportion of included students who met the promotional criteria increased from 65 percent in May to 79 percent in August (Figure 1-3). Among eighth graders, 72 percent passed in May, while fully 83 percent passed by the end of Summer Bridge (Figure 1-4).

What Happened to Students Who Did Not Meet the Test-Score Criteria?

Main findings: *In 1997, about 20 percent of third graders, 12 percent of sixth graders and 10 percent of eighth graders were retained.*[16] *The proportion of students who*

failed to meet the promotional criteria does not match the proportion actually retained because nearly one-third of students who failed to meet the criteria in 1997 were nevertheless promoted to the next grade.

In August 1997, CPS faced the decision of whether to retain students who did not meet the promotional test cutoff or to waive some of these students, promoting them despite their test scores. The third columns of Figures 1-2, 1-3, and 1-4 show the promotional outcomes for students in 1997 in each grade. At the end of August, a total of 16,744 students were eligible for retention under the policy. Of those, 10,119 were retained, and 5,793 were promoted to the next grade.[17]

The use of waivers may reflect a flexibility that is essential when applying a policy that has such important effects on students' school careers.

Waivers are an important but contentious policy lever in high stakes testing. From one perspective, waivers could be viewed as an effort to "get around the policy" and weaken its effect. Another perspective, however, is that waivers should be expected given the diversity of CPS students. The use of waivers may reflect a flexibility that is essential when applying a policy that has such important effects on students' school careers. CPS has taken the position that waivers or promotions based on more inclusive criteria are useful mechanisms by which to pursue the benefits of high stakes testing while considering special circumstances and other indicators of student performance.

During August 1997 and 1998, waivers were given by district superintendents on the basis of appeals by principals. In 1997 and 1998, the *Guidelines for Promotion in the Chicago Public Schools* did not specify criteria for waivers beyond noting that Regional Educational Officers (REOs) would consider a student's past academic performance in addition to test scores.[18] In practice, the specific criteria for waivers were decided each year by the REOs. Criteria for waivers included special circumstances, such as limited English proficiency, health problems, test scores that were very close to the cutoff, or additional evidence through grades and attendance that the student should be promoted.

In 1997, approximately one-third of third graders who failed to meet the promotional criteria in May or August were promoted.[19] We can infer that most of these promotions were due to waivers granted by REOs. Using this method, the waiver rates for sixth and eighth graders were even higher. Forty percent of sixth and eighth graders who were included under the policy and did not leave the school system were promoted to the next grade despite not meeting the promotional test score for their grade.[20]

Promoting one-third of students who did not meet the test-score cutoff significantly reduced the proportion of students in each grade who were retained. Among sixth graders, for example, the difference between failure and retention rates was substantial. As documented in Figure 1-3, more than 20 percent of included sixth graders did not meet the test cutoff by August 1997, but only 12 percent were retained.

What Happened in the Second Year for Those Students Who Were Retained in Third and Sixth Grades?

Main finding: *Only about one-third of retained third and sixth graders in 1997 were able to make the promotional test cutoff by May 1998. Ultimately, 2,365 of 4,796 retained third graders were required to go to summer school a second time. Even after two years in the same grade and as many as four chances to pass the test, only 43 percent of third graders and 47 percent of sixth graders who were retained in 1997 managed to raise their scores high enough to meet the test criteria by the end of the summer of 1998. Despite low passing rates, over two-thirds of retained students in these grades were promoted the next year, largely due to waivers.*

Figure 1-5

Summary Table: Progress of the 1997 Retained Students by Fall 1998

	Third grade	Sixth grade	Eighth grade
Retained or Transition Center, fall 1997	5,551	3,581	2,990
Passed in January 1998[1]			164 (5%)
Passed in January or May 1998	1,764 (32%)	1,204 (34%)	754 (25%)
Passed by August 1998	2,381 (43%)	1,688 (47%)	1,119 (34%)
Promoted, fall 1998	**3,731 (67%)**	**2,491 (69%)**	**1,547 (52%)**

[1] Students who were in Transition Centers were given a third chance to meet the test score cutoff in January 1998. Those who passed remained in Transition Centers for the year. They are counted as promoted in fall 1998.

Note: There are two categories of students not reported: the percentage of retained students who transferred out of the school system during the school year and the percent who were excluded from the policy in their retained year. See Figures 1-2, 1-3, and 1-4 for more detail.

Third and sixth graders who were retained at the end of the summer in 1997 were subject to the same process in 1998. First, some of these students were exempted from the policy the next year by being placed in one of the exclusion categories. Second, those students who were not excluded were again required to take the ITBS and meet the same test criteria at the end of the school year. Third, students who did not pass were required to participate in a second year of summer school and were given a fourth chance to meet the promotional test cutoff. Finally, students who did not meet the cutoff in August 1998 could be retained a second time. Figure 1-5 summarizes the progress of retained students though this promotional process during their second year in the grade.

Approximately one in ten third and sixth graders who failed to make the cutoff and were retained in 1997 were excluded from the policy in the 1998 testing year.[21] One concern about the policy is that it could provide incentives for schools to place students in special education rather than have them face a second retention. However, given that retained students are among the highest risk students in the Chicago Public Schools, an exclusion rate of 10 percent the next year does not suggest widespread use of placing students in special education as a way to avoid the policy.[22]

Among those 4,796 retained third graders who were still included under the policy in 1998, 2,365 were required to participate in a second year of Summer Bridge. The majority, 1,786, did, and 617 passed. The performance of retained sixth graders was only slightly better. In the end, less than half of those third and sixth graders initially retained in 1997 who were again included under the policy were able to raise their test scores to the promotional cutoff after four times through the ITBS in that grade.[23]

In August 1998, many retained students who did not pass the test cutoff their second time through the policy were promoted anyway, presumably because they received waivers. Approximately 38 percent of retained third graders and almost half of retained sixth graders who were again subject to and failed to meet the promotional criteria were promoted in August 1998. This meant the majority of retained students in 1997 were promoted to the next grade for the 1997-1998 school year.

At the end of the summer of 1998, CPS had to decide whether to double retain those students who did not meet the promotional criteria. This was a controversial decision. Double retaining students almost guarantees that

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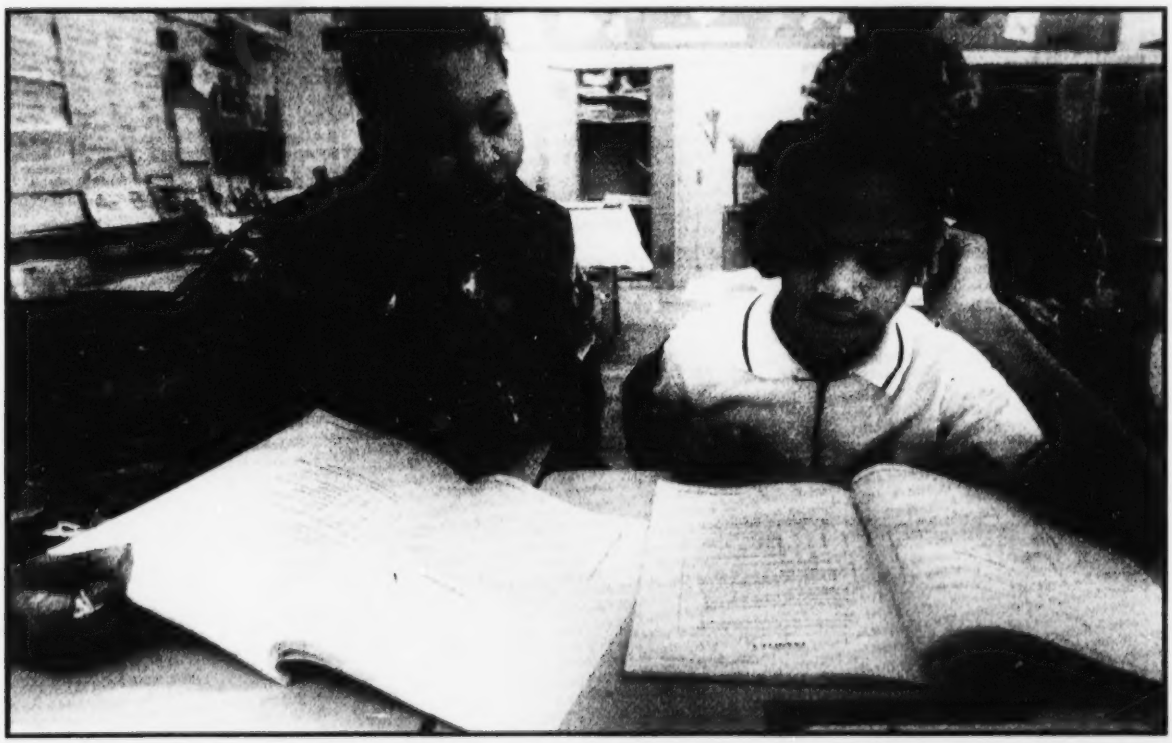
they will have to attend a Transition Center at some point because they will turn 15 before reaching eighth grade. The practice of double retaining students is so rare that we know very little about how double retention may impact a student's attitudes and performance in school. In the fall of 1998, 1,108 third graders and 522 sixth graders were retained a second time (see final columns in Figures 1-3 and 1-4).

What Happened to Eighth Graders Who Were Retained or Attended Transition Centers?

Main finding: *Passing and promotion rates in the second year were lowest among eighth graders and Transition Center students. Only 27 percent of retained or Transition Center eighth graders met the promotional criteria by May 1998. Approximately 38 percent had raised their test scores to the test cutoff by August 1998, compared to 47 percent of sixth graders. This occurred despite the fact that Transition Center students had an additional chance to pass the test in January 1998. Overall, approximately 16 percent of eighth graders retained in the fall of 1997 had dropped out by fall 1998. Another 375 eighth graders had dropped out before the official retention or promotion decision in 1997.*

Tracking the progress of eighth graders who were retained in an elementary school or sent to Transition Centers in fall 1997 is complicated because Transition Center students were given a third chance to pass the promotional test cutoff in January 1998. This was the first time CPS experimented with mid-year testing, a practice that has now been instituted in all three promotional gate grades. In January 1998, a total of 1,100 Transition Center students took the ITBS. One hundred sixty-four of these students raised their test scores in both subjects enough to be promoted (see Figure 1-5).

Part of the reason that second-year passing rates were lower among eighth graders who were retained in 1997



is that many either left the system or dropped out. Between fall 1997 and fall 1998, 449 retained eighth graders and Transition Center students left the system by moving or transferring to another school. This leave rate of 15 percent is slightly higher than the rate of 12 percent for all CPS eighth graders in 1997. Among those who remained in eighth grade for a second time or were sent to Transition Centers, 343 students dropped out during the school year and another 123 dropped out by fall 1998. This results in a 16 percent dropout rate among officially retained students.

Results for the Second Year, 1997-1998

So far this section has examined the impact of the promotional policy on CPS students affected by the first year of Chicago's efforts to end social promotion in all three promotional gate grades. What happened during the second year in which the policy was implemented? There are several reasons why we might expect passing rates to increase in 1998. First, incentive effects for students to work harder should be higher in the second year after students have had the experience of being in the classroom with others who were retained. Second, we expect that it might take schools and teachers time to adjust instruction to prepare students better for the ITBS. And third, as noted in the previous section, many more schools received extra resources during the 1997-1998 school year in the form of the Lighthouse after-school program.

Figure 1-6

Summary Table: Passing and Retention Rates for 1997 and 1998
First Time Third, Sixth, and Eighth Graders

	Third Grade		Sixth Grade		Eighth Grade	
Passed	1997	1998	1997	1998	1997	1998
Proportion passed in May	51%	61%	65%	72%	72%	72%
Summer results: Proportion of students who failed in May but passed in August	35%	30%	41%	41%	39%	45%
Proportion passed in May or August	68%	72%	79%	83%	83%	85%
Retained						
Proportion retained	20%	21%	12%	11%	10%	10%
Did Not Pass but Promoted						
Proportion promoted of those students who did not meet the cutoff	34%	21%	40%	29%	40%	31%

Note: This table is limited to students who were included in testing. Students who were in bilingual education fewer than three years or who were in special education are not represented. Thus, the proportion retained does not include students who were retained for other reasons and who fell into one of the exclusion criteria.

How Did Passing, Waiver, and Retention Rates Change from 1997 to 1998?

Main finding: *Passing rates during the school year improved in both the third and sixth grades during the second year of the policy. The proportion of included third grade students who scored a minimum of 2.8 increased from 51 percent to 61 percent from May 1997 to May 1998. Among included sixth graders, the passing rate increased from 65 to 72 percent during the same time period. The proportion of students who were retained did not decline in 1998, however, largely because fewer students received waivers.*

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Figure 1-6 compares the passing, retention, and waiver rates in 1997 and 1998, the second year in which students in all three grades were held to the *promotional criteria.*[24] *Detailed flow charts for* 1998 are included in the Appendix. In 1998, the proportion of students who met the minimum test-score cutoff for promotion by the end of the school year increased in the third and sixth grades, but not in eighth grade. In 1998, the test-score cutoff for eighth graders was raised from 7.0 to 7.2 in both subjects, diminishing any improvement in passing rates in that grade. However, passing rates in Summer Bridge in 1998 were much higher among eighth graders. Thus, after Summer Bridge, passing rates in 1998 were slightly higher in all three grades.

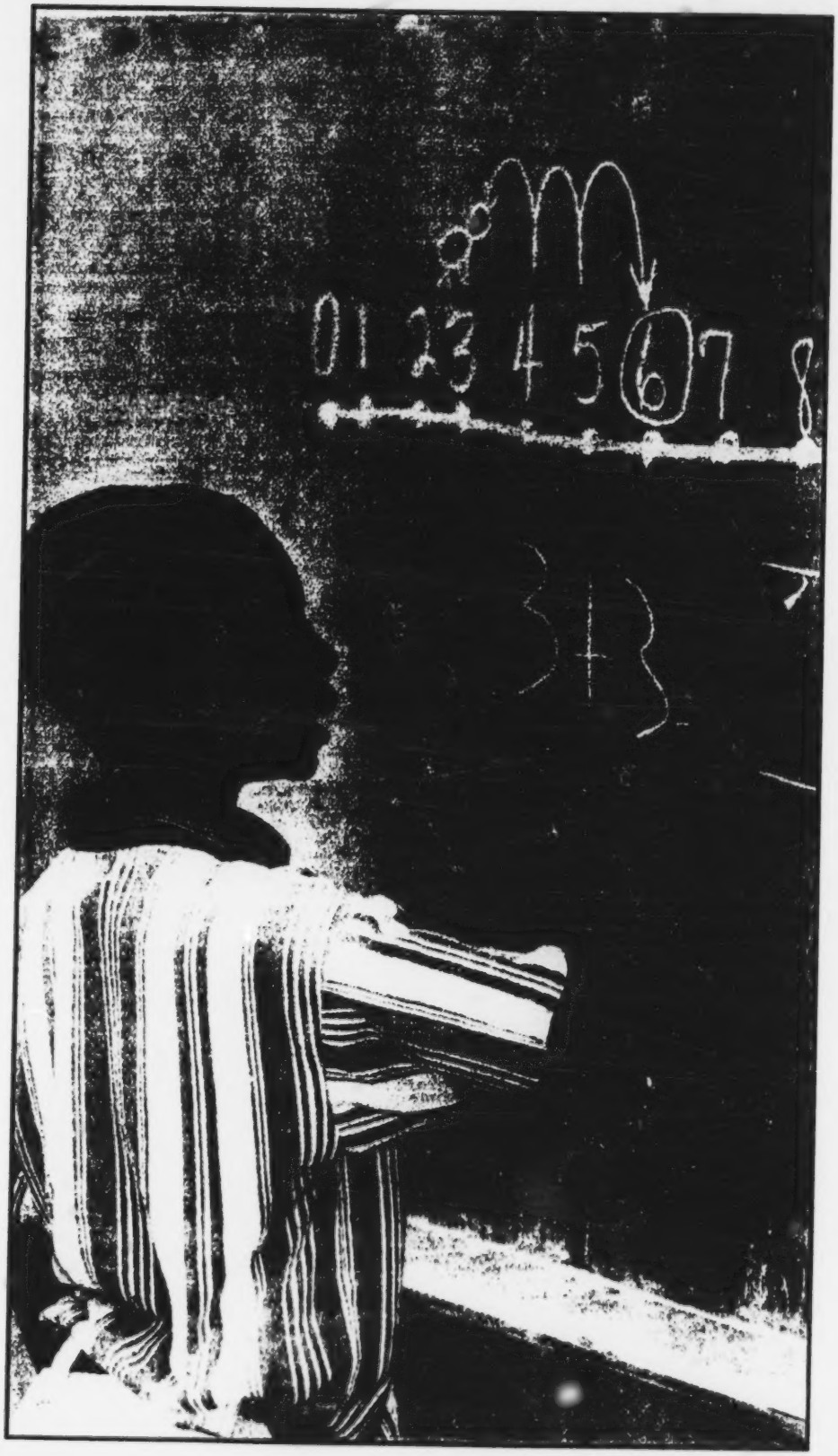
Despite higher passing rates, the proportion of students retained did not decrease between 1997 and 1998 largely because more students who did not meet the standards were retained. For example, in 1997, third graders who failed to meet the promotional criteria and stayed in the CPS system had a 34 percent chance of being promoted, compared to a 21 percent chance in 1998. This trend, shown in Figure 1-6, suggests that in the first year of the policy, Regional Education Officers were more lenient in granting waivers. It will be important to track waiver rates over time since this trend contradicts the administration's proposal to move toward rather than away from using more inclusive criteria for promotion at the end of the summer.[25]

What Have We Learned?

This section has highlighted three important aspects of the promotional policy which we will look at in further detail in the next two sections. First, we found that in both 1997 and 1998 the majority of students in the third, sixth, and eighth grades were able to meet the promotional criteria for their grade by reaching the minimum test cutoff in May or after the Summer Bridge program. In the first year, passing rates during the school year were relatively low, particularly in the third grade, where only half the students were able to reach a 2.8 in reading and mathematics by May 1997. This rate improved by May 1998, suggesting that a year of implementation and the addition of Lighthouse allowed schools to meet testing goals better. In both years, the Summer Bridge program allowed many more students to reach the promotional test cutoff so that by the end of August, over two-thirds of third graders and nearly 80 percent of sixth and eighth graders had raised their test scores enough to be promoted. In the next section we examine how these passing rates varied by how far behind students were when they entered the third, sixth, and eighth grades and compare their performance to that of a prior group of students.

Second, the use of waivers substantially reduced the proportion of students who were retained. Even with waivers, however, retention rates were high in the third grade, where 20 percent of included students were retained. The decision to retain students is the most controversial aspect of this promotional initiative. Even if the threat of retention produces benefits for those who are promoted, the continued feasibility of this initiative rests on whether CPS teachers and schools find ways to address the poor performance of those who do not meet the test-score criteria. The lack of progress of the first group of retained students under this initiative is troubling. After two times through the policy, less than half of the students who were retained in 1997 were able to raise their scores to meet the promotional cutoff. In the next section, we look more closely at the performance of retained students in 1997 by comparing their testing trends to those of students in 1995 who were socially promoted.

Finally, administrative decisions about who should be included under the policy substantially shape what it means to end social promotion. Many students were initially exempted from the policy, and waiver rates, particularly in the first year, were relatively high. If we consider students who were initially excluded and those who were later promoted after failing to meet the criteria, nearly 40 percent of third graders and 26 percent of sixth graders in 1997 were not held to the test-score cutoff. In the last section of this report, we examine how these exemption and waiver rates shaped racial differences in the effects of the policy.



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SECTION 2

Passing Rates and ITBS Achievement Trends before and after the Policy

A central premise in CPS's effort to end social promotion is that by setting standards and providing extra instructional time to students during the school year and summer, more students will meet the minimum test-score cutoffs for their grade. We evaluate this premise by comparing the proportion of students who met the cutoff in May 1997 and May 1998 with results from CPS students in May 1995 who were not subject to the promotional criteria. It is hard to evaluate changes in passing rates without knowing how many students might have been *at risk* under this policy. If most third, sixth, and eighth graders entered these grades with test scores already close to the cutoffs, then getting the majority of students to pass would not be very difficult. We begin by looking at how many CPS third, sixth, and eighth graders were actually at risk of retention given the promotional criteria set in 1997. We define risk according to the test-score gains a student would have to make in one year in order to meet the minimum test cutoff for promotion.

How Many Students Were at Risk under the Policy?

Main finding: *The initial promotional criteria established by CPS were modest—a year below grade level for third graders, a year and a half below grade level for sixth graders, and a year and eight months below grade level for eighth graders. Despite these relatively low test-score cutoffs, however, many Chicago students entered these grades with such low test scores that they would have needed above average testing gains in that grade to make the promotional cutoff by the end of the year. Almost half of third graders and close to 40 percent of sixth and eighth graders could be considered at risk of not passing the test criterion given their prior year's reading scores.*

Figure 2-1

How Many Third, Sixth, and Eighth Graders Were at Risk of Falling below the Test Score Cutoff in May 1997?

Proportion of Students with that Learning Gap	Learning Gap Students Would Have to Make Up in a Year in Order to Meet the Cutoff (Third, Sixth, and Eighth Graders in 1997)			
	Greater than 1.5 GEs	1 to 1.5 GEs	.5 to 1.0 GEs	Total at risk
Reading				
Third grade	17%	15%	16%	48%
Sixth grade	14%	14%	10%	38%
Eighth grade	18%	9%	10%	37%
Mathematics				
Third grade	1%	8%	21%	30%
Sixth grade	7%	11%	16%	34%
Eighth grade	12%	11%	14%	37%

Intuitively, a student's risk of failing to meet the promotional criteria at the end of the year depends on how much the student would have to improve his or her test scores during the promotional gate grade. We looked at average testing gains in the third, sixth, and eighth grade and at the test scores of students in the year before the promotional gate to determine how many students were at risk under this policy.[26] In 1997, for example, 17 percent of third graders had second grade reading ITBS scores below a 1.3. These students would have to increase their reading test scores by over 1.5 Grade Equivalents (GEs) in one year—over twice the normal test-score improvement rate of third graders in CPS—to make the promotional cutoff. We call these students *high risk*. We considered students more moderately at risk if they would need average to above average (.5 to 1.5 GEs) increases in one year to make the promotional cutoff.[27] Using these cutoffs, we found that many third, sixth, and eighth graders were at high or moderate risk of not meeting the promotional criteria in 1997 (see Figure 2-1). How many of these students managed to close their test score gap? We begin by looking closely at the performance of sixth graders in 1995, 1997, and 1998. We then examine results for third and eighth graders.

Sidebar 3

Why Focus on Reading?

This section focuses on passing rates—the proportion of students who met the minimum test score cutoff—in reading. There are two reasons to focus on reading. First, more students were at risk in reading than in math, and when students were at risk in reading, they tended to be farther behind. Second, it was harder to make up deficits in reading than in math. Thus, as we noted earlier (Sidebar 2), the combination of more students at risk in reading and lower test-score gains meant that many more students failed to meet the promotional criteria because of their reading scores, both during the school year and after Summer Bridge.

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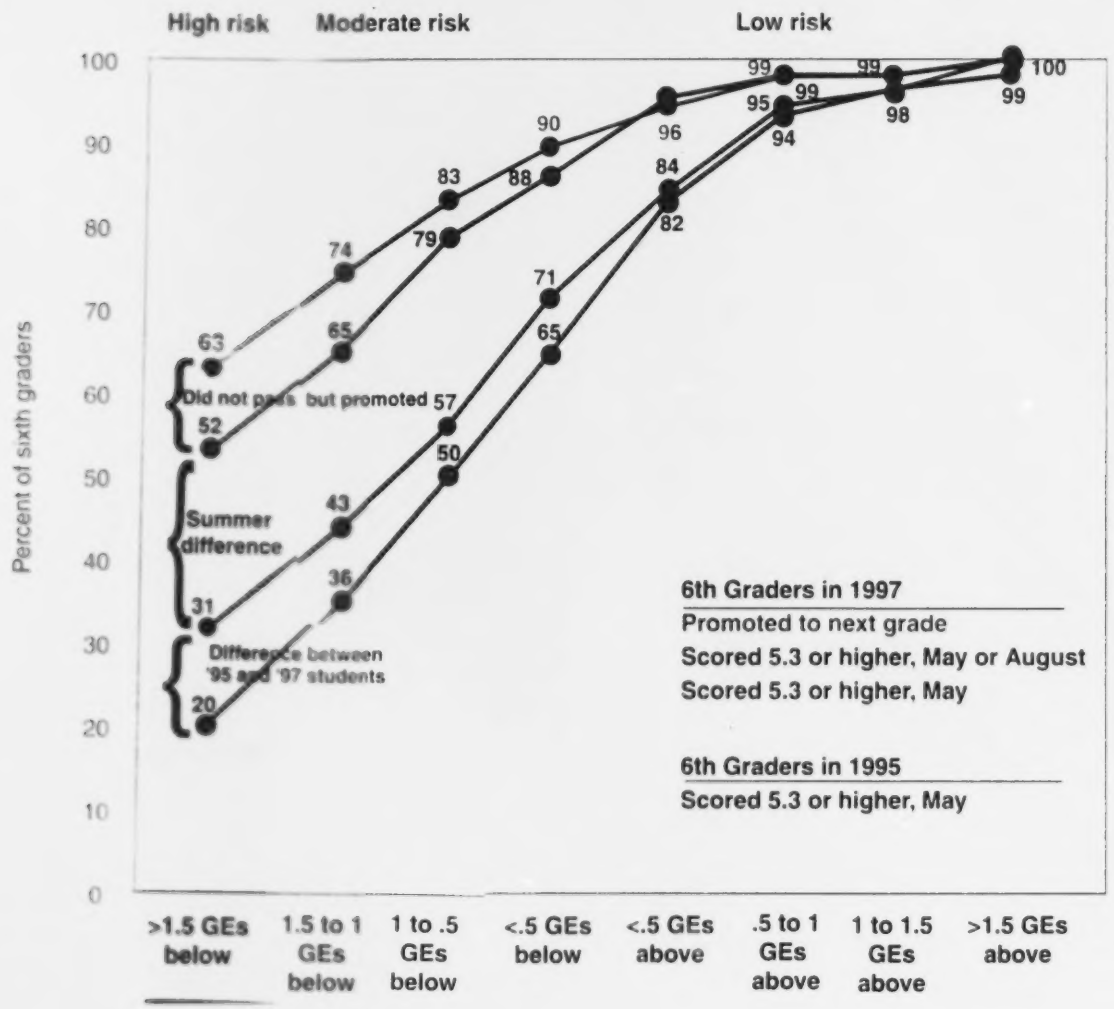
Figure 2-2

More Students Are Meeting Test Score Cutoff in 1997 Than in 1995
Sixth Grade Reading



Were More Sixth Graders Meeting the Cutoff in 1997 Than before the Policy?

Main finding: *In 1997, a higher proportion of sixth graders reached a 5.3 on the ITBS in reading by May than did sixth graders in 1995. This holds true across all risk categories, with the students at highest risk showing the largest gains in the proportion meeting the minimum test scores for promotion.*

Even if students had very low test scores in fifth grade, we might expect some to reach a 5.3 by the end of sixth grade either because they had a particularly good sixth grade year or because their fifth grade test scores were abnormally low by chance. We can adjust for these chance effects by comparing the performance of students who faced the promotional criteria in 1997 with the performance of sixth graders in 1995. Since sixth

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graders in 1995 were not subject to the promotional test cutoff, their outcomes provide a comparison for what we could expect in the absence of the policy.[28]

The black line in Figure 2-2 shows the proportion of sixth graders in May 1995 whose reading ITBS test scores were 5.3 or higher by the end of sixth grade by the testing gap students faced in that year. For example, 20 percent of students who entered sixth grade in 1994 with the lowest test scores obtained a 5.3 or higher on the reading ITBS in May 1995 at the end of sixth grade. The green line in Figure 2-2 shows the proportion of sixth graders in each risk category who made a 5.3 or higher in reading by the end of the 1996-1997 school year. Among those with the lowest test scores in May 1997 (more than 1.5 GEs below grade level), 31 percent scored a 5.3 or higher in reading. Thus, for this highest risk category, the proportion of sixth graders who passed the cutoff in May was 11 percent higher than in 1995. This trend was true across all risk categories. The difference between the 1995 passing rate and the 1997 passing rate could be interpreted as the additional increase in passing associated with the promotional policy during the school year.

It is clear from these numbers that more sixth grade students were meeting the promotional cutoff of 5.3 during the 1996-97 school year than did in 1994-95. In the next section we will look at results for third and eighth graders. Sorting out the possible explanations for this increase is hardly straightforward. We see five possibilities. First, there may be a testing or instrumentation effect of the policy, meaning that students may simply be taking the test more seriously or may be improving their test-taking skills. Second, the test-score cutoff may have had a motivational effect on students, leading them to study harder and learn more during the school year. Third, because of the promotional criteria, teachers may have changed their instruction to focus more on improving students' basic skills or may have spent more time working with these students to raise their performance, what we would call an instructional effect. Fourth, there may be a positive effect from students participating in the Lighthouse after-school program, which we would call a programmatic effect. Finally, passing rates may have simply increased because test scores have been generally rising in the Chicago Public Schools for several years. We call this a general reform effect.[29] While the previous explanations may all be a result of the policy, this last effect could be an artifact of underlying trends. At this point, we do not have sufficient evidence to evaluate these competing hypotheses. Subsequent reports in this series will seek to untangle more clearly the nature of these increases in the proportion of students meeting the promotional criteria.

Did Summer Bridge Raise the Proportion of Students Who Met the Promotional Cutoffs?

Main finding: *The second chance afforded by the Summer Bridge program substantially raised the proportion of sixth graders who reached the 5.3 cutoff before promotion.*

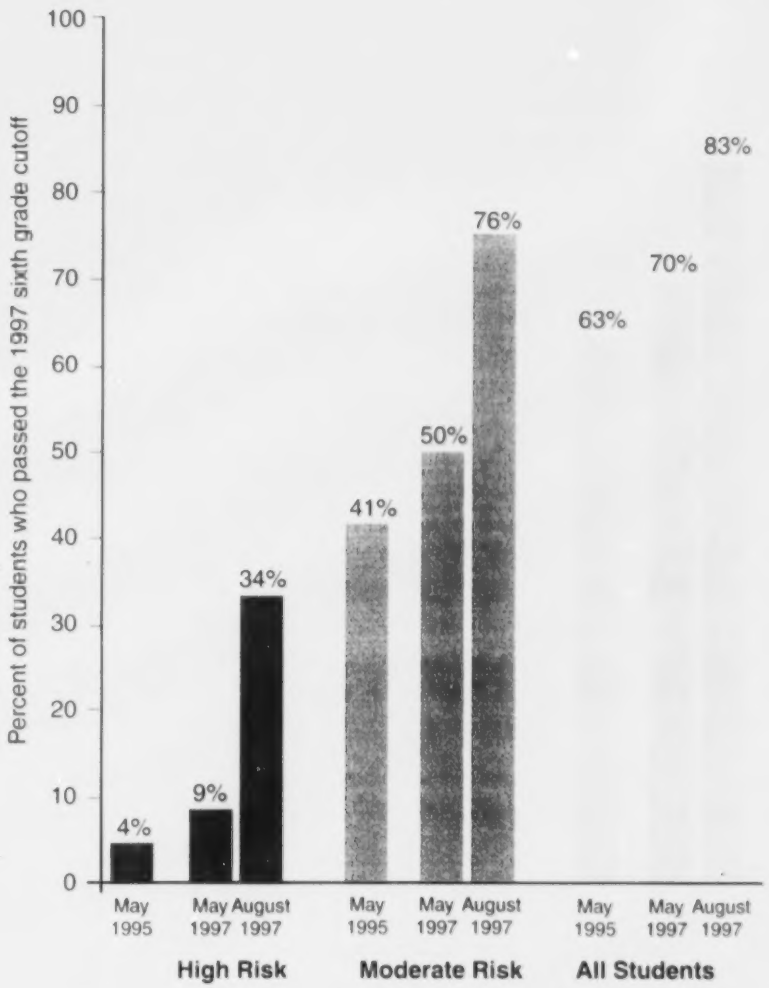
An important difference between students in May 1995 and May 1997 was that students in 1997 who failed to reach a 5.3 or higher on the ITBS were required to go to Summer Bridge and retake the test in August. The red line in Figure 2-2 shows the proportion of sixth graders who managed to meet the cutoff by either May or August 1997, after Summer Bridge. For example, 31 percent of the sixth graders at highest risk in 1997 reached the test cutoff by May. An additional 21 percent attended Summer Bridge and scored a minimum of 5.3 in reading in August. As a result, 52 percent of sixth graders in 1997 with the lowest reading skills scored 5.3 or higher in reading by August, compared to only 20 percent in 1995. These improvements in passing rates after Summer Bridge were equally impressive for students in more moderate risk categories.

How Many More Students Met the Cutoff? A More Rigorous Approach to Estimating

Main finding: *Across all sixth graders in the 1996-97 school year, the proportion who reached a minimum ITBS reading score of 5.3 before promotion to seventh grade was 20 percent higher in 1997 than in 1995. Even after using a statistical model to correct for abnormally low test scores at the end of fifth grade, the most at risk students showed the most improved performance under the policy. The combination of slightly higher passing rates during the school year and a big increase in the proportion who passed over the summer doubled the number of moderate to high risk students who reached the minimum cutoff between 1997 and 1995.*

Figure 2-3

What Percent of Sixth Grade Students Are Meeting the 5.3 Cutoff?
Comparing Reading Scores from 1995 and 1997



The increases in passing rates are impressive and suggest that the policy may be having a positive effect on raising students' scores to minimum test cutoffs before promotion. In order to look at this more systematically, we developed a statistical model to estimate each student's risk of not meeting the cutoff based on his or her growth trajectory over all of the years he or she has been in the school system, rather than just simply using the prior (fifth grade) test score.[30] Thus, if a student's fifth grade test score was abnormally low, the statistical model would correct for that, since it predicts a student's fifth grade test score on the basis of what his or her test-score growth looks like from the second to the fifth grade. We call this the *predicted* fifth grade test score and use that test score to derive a new, more reliable, estimate of how much students fall below the sixth grade cutoff. Again, we are looking only at sixth grade; in the next section we turn to results for third and eighth graders. When we use this predicted measure,

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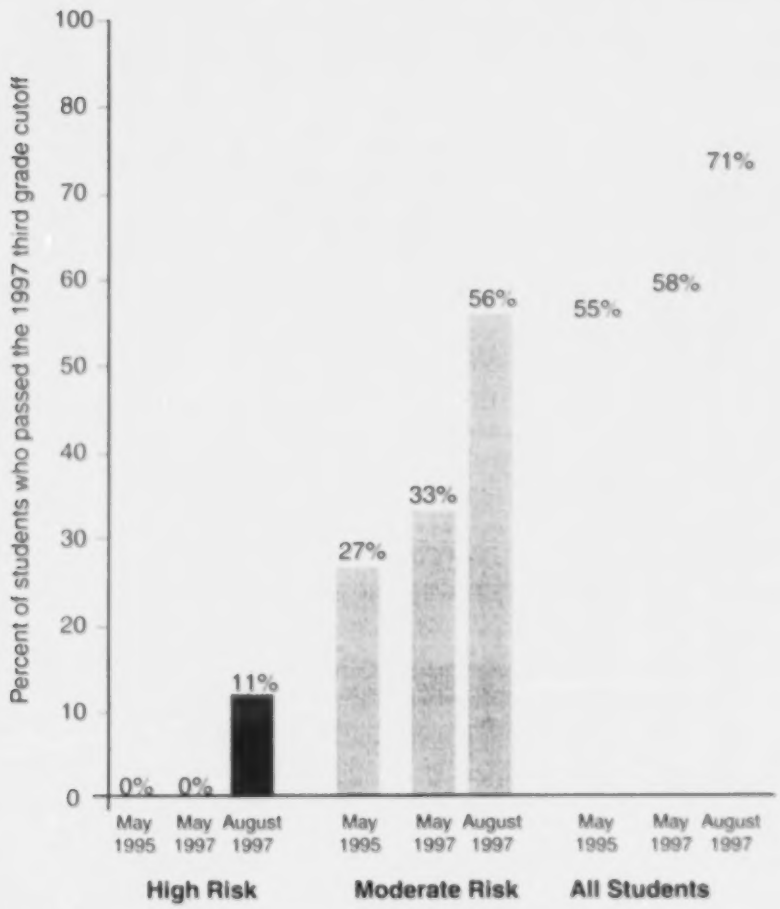
Figure 2-4

What Percent of Third Grade Students Are Meeting the 2.8 Cutoff?
Comparing Reading Scores from 1995 and 1997



Note for Figures 2-3, 2-4, and 2-5: The risk categories are created from predicted scores based on students' ITBS growth trajectories in all years prior to third grade. High risk students are those whose predicted test scores mean they would need to make up over 1.5 GEs in a year to make the cutoff. Moderate risk students are those who would have to make up .5 to 1.5 GEs in a year to make the cutoff.

we find results similar to the descriptive results. Figures 2-3, 2-4, and 2-5 detail the passing rates of third, sixth, and eighth graders using their predicted test scores to calculate their risk.

Even after statistically adjusting for abnormally low test scores in fifth grade, the proportion of sixth graders who scored at least a 5.3 on their ITBS in reading by the time they were promoted to seventh grade increased from 4 percent to 34 percent among the students at highest risk between May 1995 and August 1997, and from 41 percent to 76 percent among students at moderate risk.

How Do Passing Rates for Third, Sixth, and Eighth Graders in 1997 Compare to 1995 Rates?

Main finding: *There was little increase in the proportion of third graders who met the minimum ITBS cutoff in reading of 2.8 between May 1995 and May 1997. High passing rates in Summer Bridge, however, substantially raised the proportion of third graders who reached 2.8 on the ITBS in reading before the following fall. By August 1997, 71 percent of all third graders scored 2.8 or higher on the reading ITBS compared to only 58 percent in May 1997 and 55 percent in 1995. As with sixth graders, increases in passing rates among eighth graders reflected a combination of more students meeting the cutoff during the school year and during Summer Bridge. Only 66 percent of eighth graders in 1995 scored a 7.0 or higher in reading by May. In 1997, 78 percent of eighth graders reached a 7.0 by May, and an additional 9 percent did so over the course of the summer.*

Figures 2-3 through 2-5 present the testing results for all third, sixth, and eighth graders by their predicted risk. In both the third and eighth grades, the proportion of students who reached the minimum criteria set by CPS before the following fall was substantially higher in 1997 than in 1995. But while in sixth and eighth grades this increase reflects

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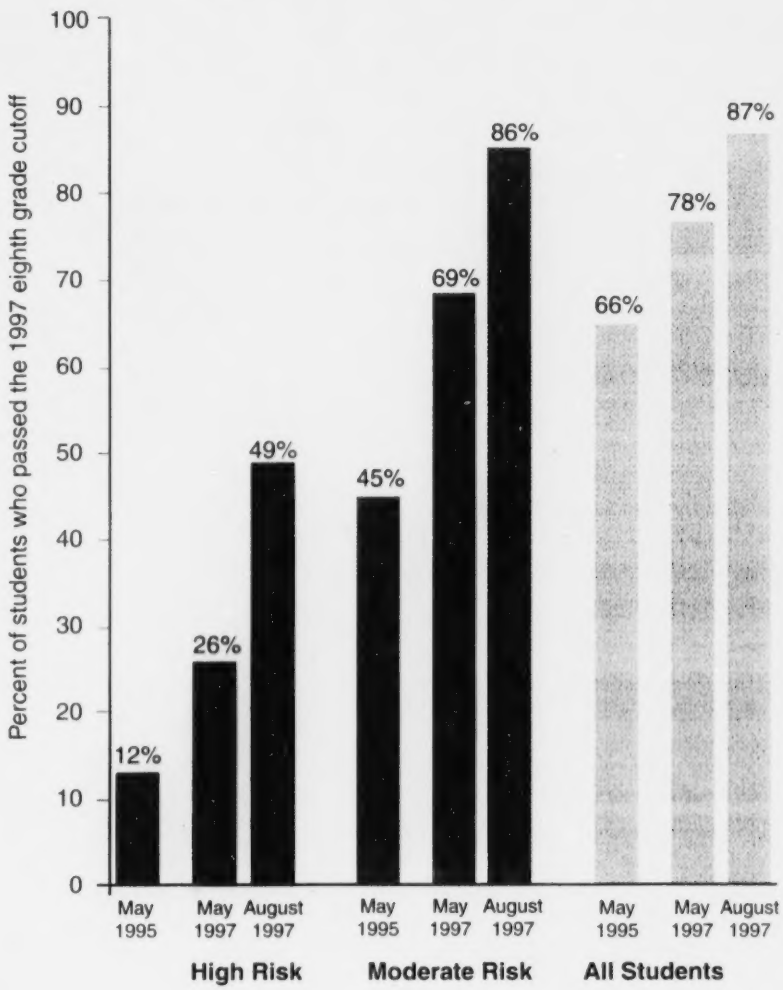
both higher passing rates during the school year and students passing over the summer, in the third grade there appears to be little school-year effect. This was true across all risk categories. Thus, among third graders, almost all of the gains in the proportion of students meeting the minimum test cutoff in August 1997 can be attributed to the effect of Summer Bridge in raising students' test scores, particularly among high to moderate risk students.

In contrast, increases in the proportion of students meeting the cutoff by May were greatest among eighth graders. Among all eighth graders, the proportion who scored 7.0 or more on the ITBS in reading was 12 percent higher in May 1997 than in 1995. Among the high risk eighth graders, the proportion who reached this cutoff during the school year doubled between May 1995 and May 1997, from 12 to 26 percent. These percentages increased even more after Summer Bridge. Indeed, among the eighth graders at high risk, nearly half had a reading ITBS score of 7.0 or higher before the following fall!

Figure 2-5

What Percent of Eighth Grade Students Are Meeting the 7.0 Cutoff?
Comparing Reading Scores from 1995 and 1997



Why was the increase in school year passing rates so much higher among eighth graders than among third graders? The 1996-1997 school year was the first year in which third graders faced the promotional criteria. It was the second year for eighth graders since the CPS began the promotional initiative in the 1995-96 school year with the eighth grade. Thus, some of this difference may be the effect of a second year of implementation. But these differences are large and are reflected across all three grades. Why we observe greater effects of the policy in eighth and sixth grades is an issue we will return to in the interpretative summary of this report.

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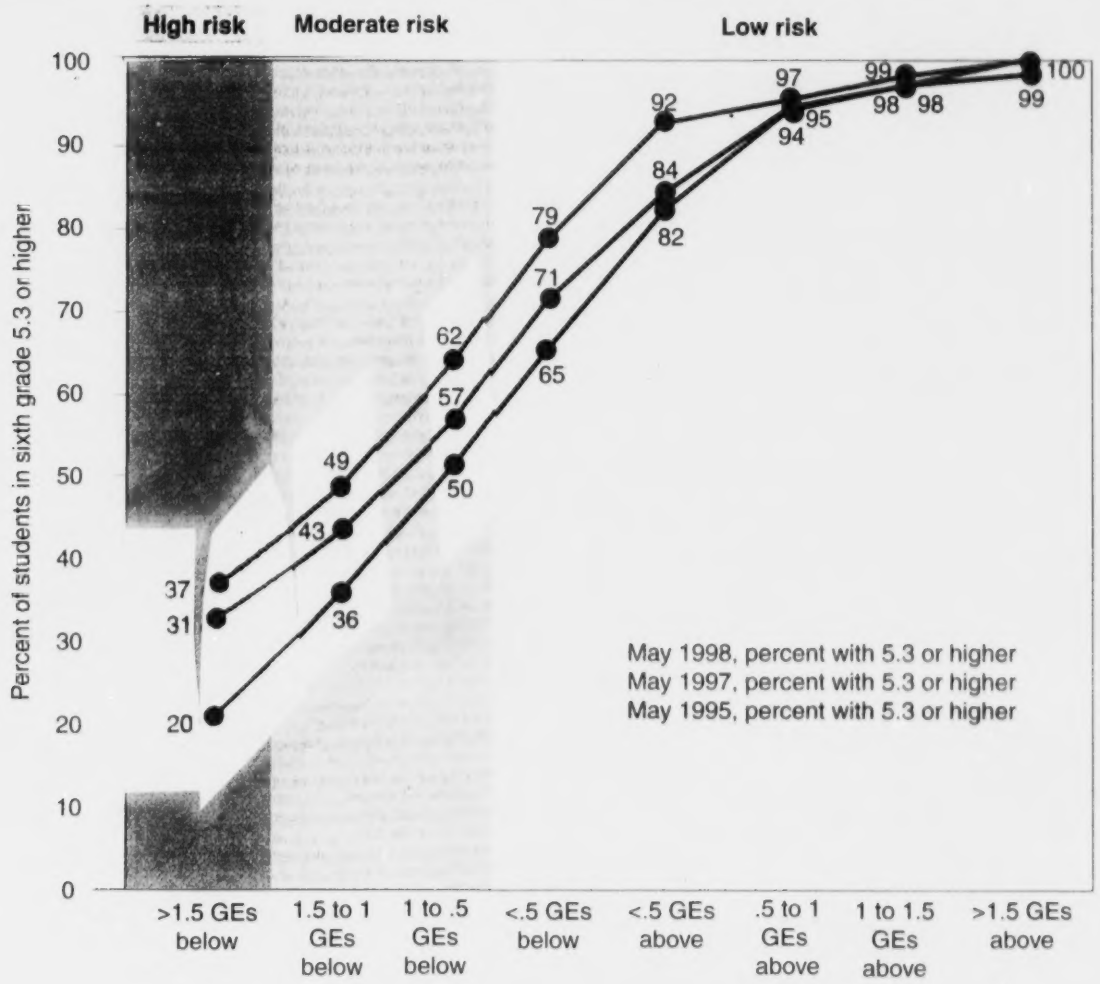
Figure 2-6

Sixth-Grade Passing Rates by Prior Year Risk Category
May 1995, 1997, and 1998



To What Extent Were 1998 Passing Rates for Third and Sixth Graders Better?

Main finding: *The proportion of sixth graders who met the promotional criteria by the end of sixth grade in 1998 increased across all risk categories. For third graders, improvements in passing rates were concentrated among more moderately at risk students. The proportion of high risk third graders who were able to raise their reading test scores to 2.8 by the end of third grade changed little between May 1997 and May 1998.*

In the previous section, we documented that in the second year of the policy, the proportion of students who met the minimum ITBS cutoffs for promotion improved in both the third and sixth grades. To what extent was this improved performance shared across students?

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Figure 2-6 compares the proportion of sixth graders in May of 1995, 1997, and 1998 who met the promotional cutoff of 5.3 by the end of the school year by level of risk on entry into sixth grade. As shown, the 1998 (orange) line is above both the 1997 (green) and 1995 (black) lines. This means that passing rates among sixth graders were higher in almost every risk category in 1998 than in 1997 and in 1995. Increases in passing rates were observed in almost every risk category. Thus, not only do we find evidence of a school-year effect of the policy in increasing the proportion of students who met the cutoffs by May, we also find improvements in passing rates in the second year of the policy. For example, between 1995 and 1998, the proportion of sixth grade students who increased their reading ITBS scores by 1.5 GEs or more to meet the cutoff was 37 percent in 1998 compared to only 20 percent in 1995.

Results for third graders are more mixed. Across all third graders, the proportion who met or exceeded the 2.8 reading cutoff by May rose 10 percent from 1997 to 1998 (see Figure 1-6 on page 20). But this improvement occurred because students at moderate risk were doing better. As seen in Figure 2-7, there was very little improvement over pre-policy (1995) trends in the proportion of high-risk third graders who were able to meet the cutoff. Indeed, among the highest risk students, the 1998 (orange) passing rate is actually below the 1997 (green) and 1995 (black) rates. Greater improvement among more moderate-risk students could mean that teachers are beginning to triage their efforts to raise third graders' skills to the minimum cutoff. It may also mean that instruction and programs in the third grade are improving the chances of passing for moderate-risk students, but are leaving those with the poorest skills behind.

Please visit the Consortium's web page, **http://www.consortium-chicago.org**, to participate in an ongoing dialogue about the CPS's policy to end social promotion.

A Comparison of Two-Year ITBS Achievement Trends for 1995 and 1997 Students

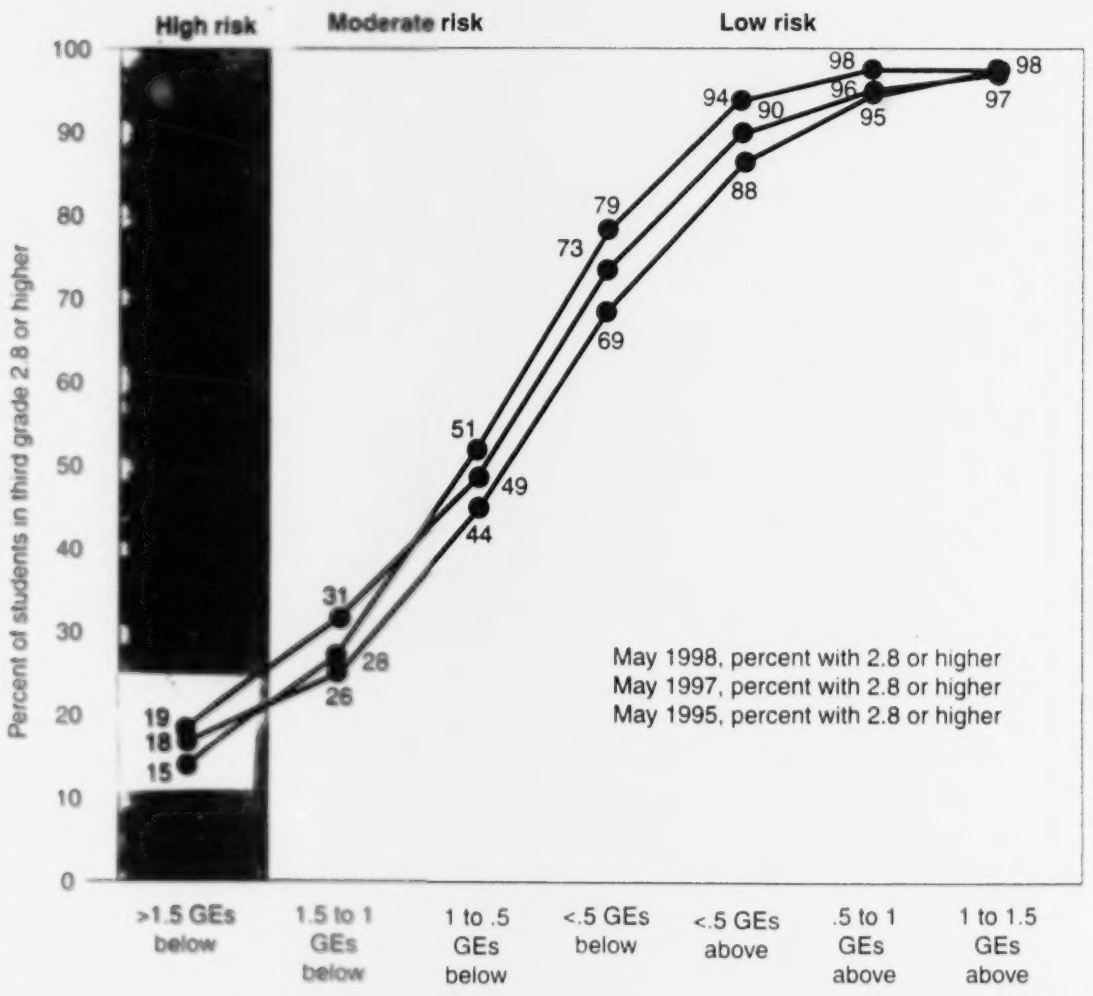
Ultimately, whether the CPS policy is considered a success depends upon students' long-term performance. The 1996-1997 group is the first group of students who faced promotional criteria for which we can examine testing gains both in the year prior to and the year following promotion or retention. In this section, we compare 1997 students' test-score trends over two years to those of students in 1995 for third and sixth graders.[51] Eighth graders who are promoted to high school take a different test, the Test of Achievement Proficiency (TAP). Because TAP and ITBS scores are not strictly comparable, we cannot simply compare test-score gains in the year after promotion or retention. We emphasize that the statistics presented in this section are descriptive. Forthcoming technical reports will offer more specific estimates of the effect of the policy on test-score gains for students in the pre-testing year, in Summer Bridge, and after retention or promotion. We look at the passing rates for the sixth graders first, then follow with those for third and eighth graders.

What Were the ITBS Achievement Trends among Students Who Met the Test Criteria in May?

Main finding: *Students who reached the sixth grade test-score cutoff by the end of the school year in 1997 had ITBS achievement gains between fifth and seventh grade that were comparable to students in the 1995 group who would have met the cutoff. The difference between 1995 and 1997 was that a higher proportion of sixth graders were now represented in this group.*

Figure 2-7

Third-Grade Passing Rates by Prior Year Risk Category
May 1995, 1997, and 1998



In May 1995, 63 percent of sixth graders had ITBS scores that would have met the minimum cutoff of 5.3. The dashed black line in Figure 2-8 documents these students' test-score trends from May in fifth grade to May in seventh grade. This is our comparison group—students who would have met the test-score cutoff in the sixth grade had the policy been in place. The green line shows the test-score trends for students in the 1997 group who met the minimum cutoff in May. Both of these groups looked similar at the end of fifth grade. Both groups increased their ITBS scores by approximately two Grade Equivalents (GEs) over the two years between May of fifth and May of seventh grade. But as we saw in the previous section, 70 percent of sixth graders passed the cutoff at the end of the school year in 1997. Thus, a higher proportion of

students are represented in the May passing line in 1997 than in 1995, and these students had similar growth trajectories over the two years.

What Were the ITBS Achievement Trends for Sixth Graders in 1995 Who Were Socially Promoted?

Main finding: *Sixth graders who were socially promoted in 1995 were falling behind their counterparts.*

The dashed grey line in Figure 2-8 shows the two-year test-score trend for our second comparison group, the 37 percent of sixth grade students in May 1995 who did not meet the minimum test score of 5.3 used in May 1997 as the promotional cutoff. These are the "*social promotes*"—students who were promoted despite performance that was substantially below grade level. The average end-of-fifth-grade test score of the "social promotes"—a 3.9—was almost two years below grade level. This group had very small test-score gains in the sixth grade, and while their reading ITBS scores increased 1.2 GEs on average in seventh grade, they did not make up for their lower than average starting point in fifth grade. Between the end of fifth grade and the end of seventh grade, students who did not make the minimum 5.3 test score in May 1995 had two-year test-score gains of 1.5 years on average, compared to test-score gains of approximately 2.0 years on average for their counterparts who met the cutoff. Thus, the 1995 group of socially promoted students were 1.9 years on average below grade level at the end of fifth grade, but were fully 2.4 years below grade level by the end of seventh grade. This testing trajectory demonstrates why social promotion became such a concern in Chicago. Clearly, there was a large group of students who were falling even further behind as they moved through elementary school.

Did Summer Bridge Pay Off?

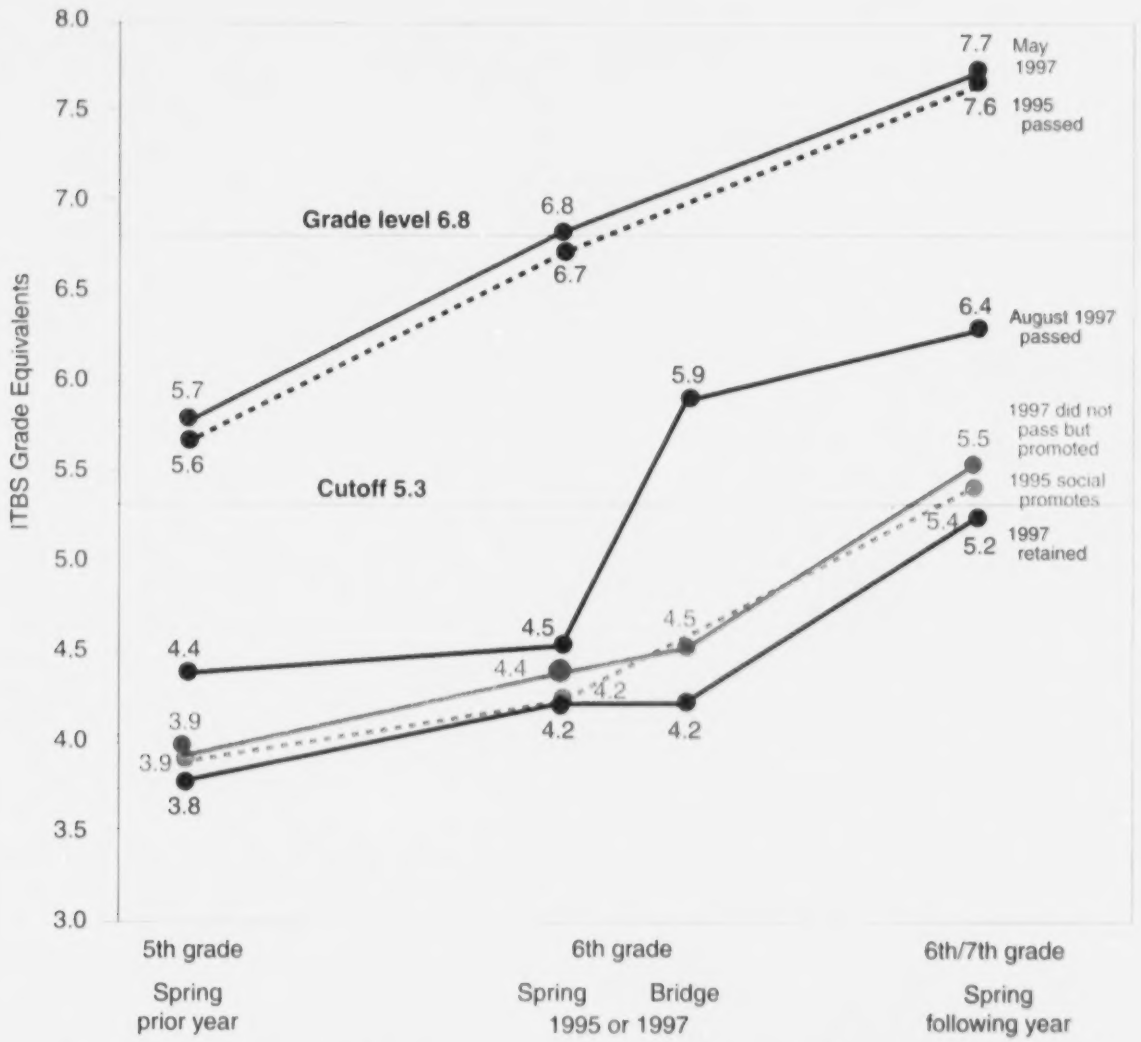
Main finding: *Sixth graders who failed to meet the reading cutoff at the end of sixth grade but passed after Summer Bridge had comparable two-year test-score gains, on average, to their counterparts who made the test cutoff in May. Unfortunately, these students did not make up sufficient ground. As a result, two years later they were at risk of not meeting the eighth grade cutoff.*

As we saw previously, in 1997 an additional 13 percent of sixth graders achieved the promotional cutoff score by August, after Summer Bridge. The blue line in Figure 2-8 shows the average growth trend over two years for these students. Results for this group are mixed. First, students who failed to meet the reading ITBS cutoff in May and passed after Summer Bridge had very poor test-score gains in sixth grade and dramatic increases in Summer Bridge. This suggests that their May test scores might have been abnormally low. Moreover, large Summer Bridge increases did not translate into substantially better test-score gains in the seventh grade. Rather, after a bad sixth grade year, Summer Bridge promotes had, on average, another weak seventh grade year. Students who passed after Summer Bridge gained only 5 months during seventh grade.

Even if we consider that these Summer Bridge gains may be somewhat inflated because of abnormally low test scores in May, it is clear for this middle group that test-score gains in Summer Bridge worked to keep them on track, but did not allow them to make up ground. This means that the sixth graders who passed after Summer Bridge entered eighth grade again at risk of not meeting the promotional criteria. That is, a seventh grader with reading test scores of 6.4 would again need to make up a year in order to be promoted to the next grade. This is well above the testing rate this group demonstrated in the prior two school years. It will be important to follow these students through their second promotional gate. How much can they draw on the prior experience of facing and meeting a test cutoff when they must do it again in eighth grade? And, how many of these students will be required to participate in a second round of Summer Bridge in order to continue to high school?

Figure 2-8

Two-Year Growth in ITBS Reading Scores
Sixth Graders in 1997 Compared with 1995



Students Who Met the 1997 Cutoff

1995: Attained a score of 5.3 or higher (n = 13,683)
May 1997: Made promotion cutoff (5.3) (n = 15,876)
May 1997 Bridge: Made promotion cutoff in August (n = 2,626)

Students Who Did Not Meet the 1997 Cutoff

1995: Did not attain a score of 5.3 (n = 9,014)
Bridge 1997: Did not pass but promoted after Summer Bridge (n = 774)[1]
Bridge 1997: Retained after Summer Bridge (n = 1,782)[1]

[1] Only students with Summer Bridge scores; 2,911 students were eliminated from these groups because they did not participate in Summer Bridge.

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How Did Retained and Waived Students Progress?

Main finding: *Both waived and retained sixth graders in 1997 did as poorly as those who were socially promoted in 1995.*

The dark red and yellow lines in Figure 2-8 show test-score gains over two years for sixth grade students in 1997 who did not meet the test cutoff in August after attending Summer Bridge.[32] Students who did not meet the test criteria in August 1997 look, on average, similar to the 1995 social promotes. And, like previously socially promoted students, this group had very weak sixth grade years. Importantly, retained students in 1997 also made little progress over the summer. Because of their relatively poor sixth grade years and the fact that they did not make that up in Summer Bridge, retained and waived students were falling farther behind their counterparts who made the cutoff and were promoted. Students who were retained in 1997 had two-year test-score gains of 1.4 years compared to gains of 1.6 for students who were waived, and gains of 1.5 for students in 1995 who were socially promoted. The difference is that retained students faced the test cutoff again in May 1998. In the first section, we noted that passing rates for retained students in the second year were very low. Figure 2-8 demonstrates why. At the end of the second time through sixth grade, the average retained sixth grade student had a reading ITBS score of only 5.2, still below the promotional test criterion.

What Were the Results for Third Graders?

Main finding: *Third graders who made the test cutoff in May 1997 had test-score gains in the year after promotion similar to those of students who would have made the cutoff in May 1995. Those who passed after Summer Bridge had substantial test-score gains during Summer Bridge, but again performed more poorly during the following school year. The performance of third graders who were retained in 1997 was worse than that of third graders in 1995 who had similar ITBS scores, but were promoted. Third graders who were retained in 1997 had very poor third grade years and only slightly better test-score gains their second time through third grade.*

In general, the pattern of results among third graders is quite similar to that discussed above for sixth graders. As seen in Figure 2-9, the average third grader in both May 1995 and May 1997 who made the promotional cutoff of 2.8 had test-score gains of 2.0 over two years. Similarly, third graders in 1997 who participated in Summer Bridge and passed at the end of the summer gained 1.9 GEs over the two years.

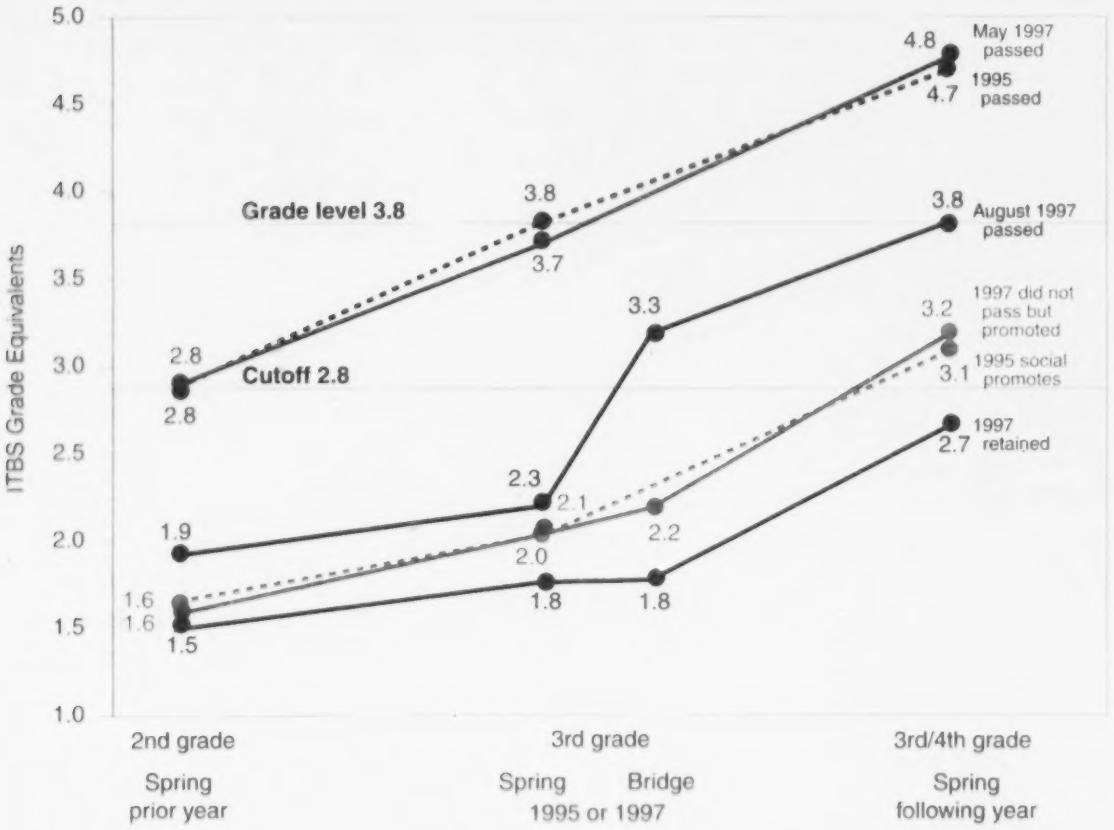
Third grade results differ from those observed in the sixth grade regarding trends in the test-score gains of retained students. Unlike retained sixth graders in 1997, who had gains in their second year comparable to their promoted counterparts from 1995, retained third graders had another relatively poor year the second time through third grade. Over two years, third grade students who were retained in 1997 increased their ITBS reading scores by only 1.2 GEs, compared to approximately 1.6 years on average for students in 1997 who were waived, and 1.5 for previously socially promoted students (see Figure 2-9). After two years in third grade, the average score of retained third graders was again below the cutoff of 2.8, explaining why only one-third of retained third graders were able to pass the promotional criterion in May 1998. This trend underscores that third graders who were retained in 1997 appear to present substantial learning problems.

What Were the Dropout Rates among Eighth Graders in 1995 and 1997?

Main finding: *The one-year dropout rate among eighth graders with low skills was slightly higher in 1997 than in 1995, although there was no increase in the overall dropout rate for the 1997 group.*

Figure 2-9

Two-Year Growth in ITBS Reading Scores
Third Graders in 1997 Compared with 1995



Students Who Met the 1997 Cutoff

1995: Attained a score of 2.8 or higher (n = 10,689)
May 1997: Made promotion cutoff (2.8) (n = 10,971)
1997 Bridge: Made promotion cutoff in August (n = 2,402)

Students Who Did Not Meet the 1997 Cutoff

1995: Did not attain a score of 2.8 (n = 9,495)
1997 Bridge: Did not pass but promoted after Summer Bridge (n = 1,325)[1]
1997 Bridge: Retained after Summer Bridge (n = 2,763)[1]

[1] Only students with Summer Bridge scores; 1,044 students were eliminated from these groups because they did not participate in Summer Bridge.

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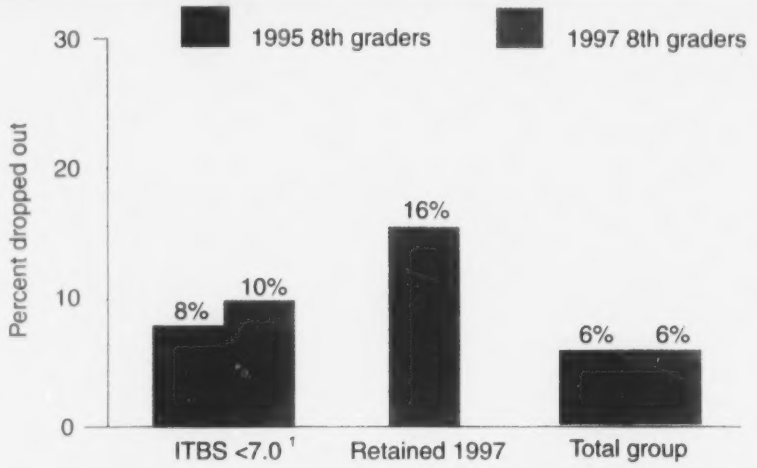
Figure 2-10

Percent of 1995 and 1997 Eighth Graders Who Dropped Out by Fall after the Retention Year



[1] "ITBS <7.0" is the dropout rate for eighth graders who failed the ITBS cutoff in May 1997 and those who would have failed to meet the cutoff in 1995 if the policy had been in place that year.

A final and important topic in our examination of the post-retention or promotion year is the question of whether more eighth grade students are dropping out. We documented in Section 1 (see Figure 1-4 on page 14) that 16 percent of eighth graders who were retained or sent to Transition Centers in 1997 dropped out by the fall of 1998. Assessing the impact of the social promotion policy in this area is tricky because prior studies find that students with low skills often face high rates of failure in high school. In order to begin addressing this question, we compared the dropout rate among students who did not meet the minimum test score for promotion in 1997 with that of students who would not have met the test criteria but were socially promoted in 1995. As seen in Figure 2-10, 8 percent of students in 1995 who had ITBS reading and mathematics scores below 7.0 dropped out by the fall of the next year. Since these students with low skills would have failed to meet the test cutoff had it been in place, they represent a good comparison group for the dropout rate we might expect among students who faced the policy in 1997. The comparable dropout rate for eighth graders who failed to meet the test cutoff in 1997 was just slightly higher than among the 1995 group. Because we are dealing with dropout rates among a small group, there was no appreciable increase in the overall one-year dropout rate.[33] This trend in dropout rates among students with the lowest skills is troubling, however, and is consistent with the findings of prior research that students who are retained are more likely to drop out.

Subsequent reports will track trends in dropout rates through high school. Since the summer between tenth and eleventh grade is the most common time for dropping out, results from the 1998-1999 school year will allow us to derive a more accurate and complete assessment of whether dropout rates are rising under the promotional policy.

What Have We Learned?

At first glance, the test-score cutoffs set by the Chicago Public Schools for promotion might seem low. Nonetheless, a high proportion of CPS third, sixth, and eighth graders had such low test scores that they were at risk of not meeting those cutoffs. Nearly one-third of third graders and approximately one-quarter of sixth and eighth graders had to increase their reading ITBS scores by over a year to meet the test criteria in 1997.

In this light, the performance of students in these grades seems like a major success. The proportion of students who raised their test scores to the promotional cutoff was substantially higher during the 1996-97 school

year than during 1994-95. In the sixth and eighth grades, increases reflected both improvement in student performance during the school year and positive effects associated with Summer Bridge. In the third grade, most improvements in the proportion of students who were able to attain a minimum of 2.8 in reading occurred during the Summer Bridge program.

Increases in passing rates were highest among the students at greatest risk in grades six and eight but not in grade three. Critics worry that this policy sets students with the lowest skills up for failure, placing the costs of the policy on the backs of the most vulnerable. The statistics presented here substantially complicate the story. Students with very low test scores were retained at higher rates. But among those same high-risk students, the proportion who were able to meet the minimum cutoff for their grade increased from 4 to 34 percent among sixth graders and from 12 to 49 percent among eighth graders, as shown in Figures 2-4 and 2-5 on pages 28 and 29.

The basic theory of action of the CPS promotional initiative is that getting students' test scores up to a minimum cutoff will lay the basis for long-term school success. In this respect, the evidence from the first group of students who experienced this policy is mixed and inconclusive. One way of viewing the results presented in this section is that the promotional policy has taken the very large group of students who used to be socially promoted and sorted those students into three categories. First, more students are meeting the test criteria during the school year. These students now share testing trajectories comparable to their counterparts who would have met the cutoffs in May 1995.

Second, more students are meeting the minimum cutoffs after participating in Summer Bridge. In the sixth grade, for example, 13 percent of 1997 students

failed to make the promotional criteria in May but did so after Summer Bridge (see Figure 2-4 on page 28). The story for these students, however, is more mixed. These students were placed into Summer Bridge because they had relatively poor test-score gains in sixth grade. Summer Bridge worked to jump these students forward and, because of large test-score gains in Summer Bridge, their two-year ITBS achievement trajectories were on track. But, the following year they returned to ITBS achievement rates similar to their prior years. As a result, they actually made up little ground over the course of two years. Consequently, sixth graders who passed after Summer Bridge were again at risk of not meeting the promotional criteria in the eighth grade. It appears that the positive effects of the Summer Bridge program are not compensating for weak instruction or motivation problems during the school year. These more marginal students may need extra help all along the way, an explanation that challenges the assumption that one-shot interventions are all that students need. After 1999, we will know much more about test-score trends among this smaller group having observing their experience through a second promotional gate.

The third group of students are those who do not make the promotional gate and are retained or are waived. In the sixth grade in 1997, for example, 17 percent of students did not meet the promotional test cutoff at the end of the school year or after Summer Bridge (see Figure 2-4 on page 28), and as we saw in the previous section, 12 percent were retained (see Figure 1-5 on page 18). Clearly, this is better than the 37 percent of students who did not meet the cutoff in 1995 and were socially promoted (see Figure 2-4 on page 28). But ITBS achievement trends among this group are troubling. Students who were retained do not appear through these simple descriptive comparisons to be doing any better than students who were previously socially promoted. They may actually be doing slightly worse—particularly the third graders. The difference is that retained students now have the negative experience of retention, are now over-age for grade and are now faced with meeting the promotional gate a second time. Clearly, we need to be careful in over-interpreting these simple descriptive comparisons because we are comparing the performance of all students who were previously socially promoted to the much smaller group of students who were retained under the policy in 1997. Thus, for third graders, we are comparing trends in the performance of the 45 percent of third graders in 1995 who were socially promoted to trends among the 20 percent of students in 1997 who were retained. How comparable these group are remains uncertain. Nonetheless, the bottom line is clear. The goal of CPS efforts during the retained year is to address poor performance among students who do not meet the minimum test cutoff. This goal is clearly not being met.

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SECTION 3

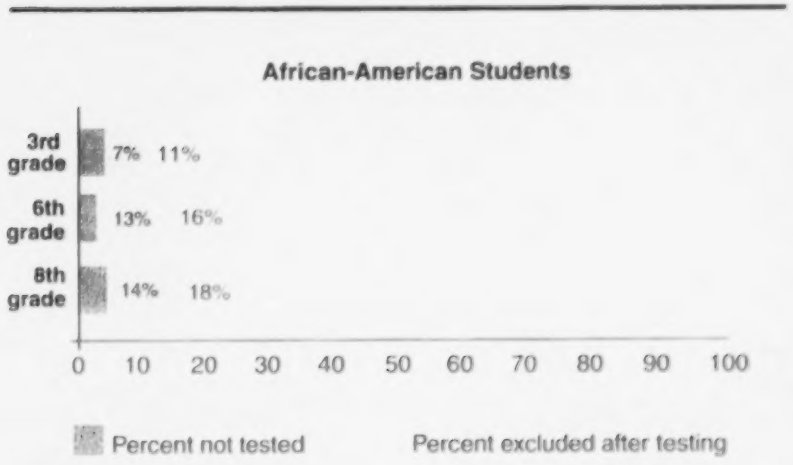
Ethnic and Gender Differences in Exclusion, Passing, Waiver, and Retention Rates

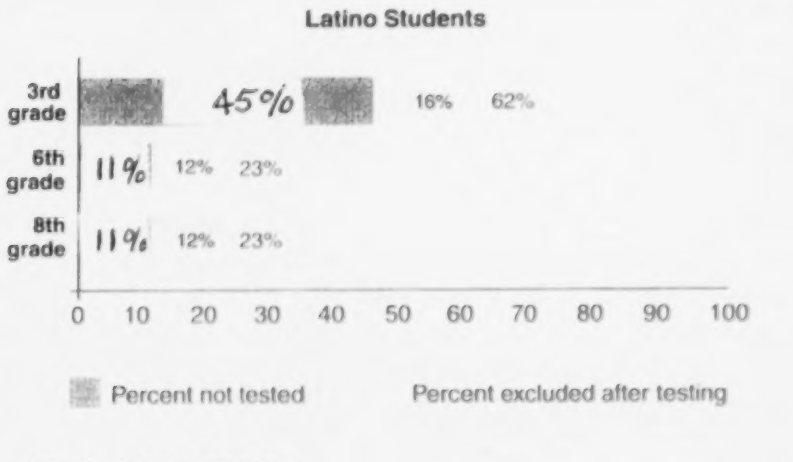
Like many large urban school systems, the CPS primarily serves minority students. In the 1996-1997 school year, 54 percent of the CPS student body was African-American, 32 percent was Latino, and 10 percent was white non-Latino. Many critics of this policy worry that if large urban school systems adopt promotional testing policies, minority students will be disproportionately affected by retention. This is a particular concern for Latino students, who are the fastest rising population in the Chicago Public Schools.[34] Bilingual students—especially recent immigrants—may be particularly at risk for retention because they are trying to meet the testing criteria while gaining proficiency in a new language.

Section 1 of this report examined two sets of administrative decisions that affect outcomes under the CPS promotional policy. We looked at the criteria determining whether students' promotional decisions are subject to the test-score cutoffs—whether they are included or excluded—and the decision to waive students who do not meet the cutoff. In this section, we examine how these administrative decisions and the performance of students under the policy varied between Latinos and African-Americans and between boys and girls during the first year of implementation, 1996-1997. We limit our analysis to African-Americans and Latinos because the numbers of non-Latino white and Asian students who are highly at risk under this policy are too small for valid comparisons of performance.

Figure 3-1

African-American and Latino Students Excluded
Third, Sixth, and Eighth Graders, 1997





Note: 5% and below not labeled

How Did Ethnic Differences Impact Third Graders under the Policy?

Main finding: *In the third grade, 62 percent of Latino students were excluded from the promotional policy, compared to approximately 11 percent of African-American students. Among those students included under the policy, African-American third graders were more at risk of non-promotion and, once tested, had poorer passing rates than Latinos. The combination of higher exclusion rates and slightly higher passing rates among Latinos meant that African-American third graders were 1.67 times more likely to be retained in the third grade than their Latino counterparts.*

Section 1 of this report documents that almost one-third of third graders were excluded from the policy, largely because they were in bilingual education. Clearly, these exclusions were concentrated among Latinos. During the 1996-1997 school year, 46 percent of Latino third graders were not tested because of their participation in bilingual education, and among those tested an additional 16 percent had their test scores excluded

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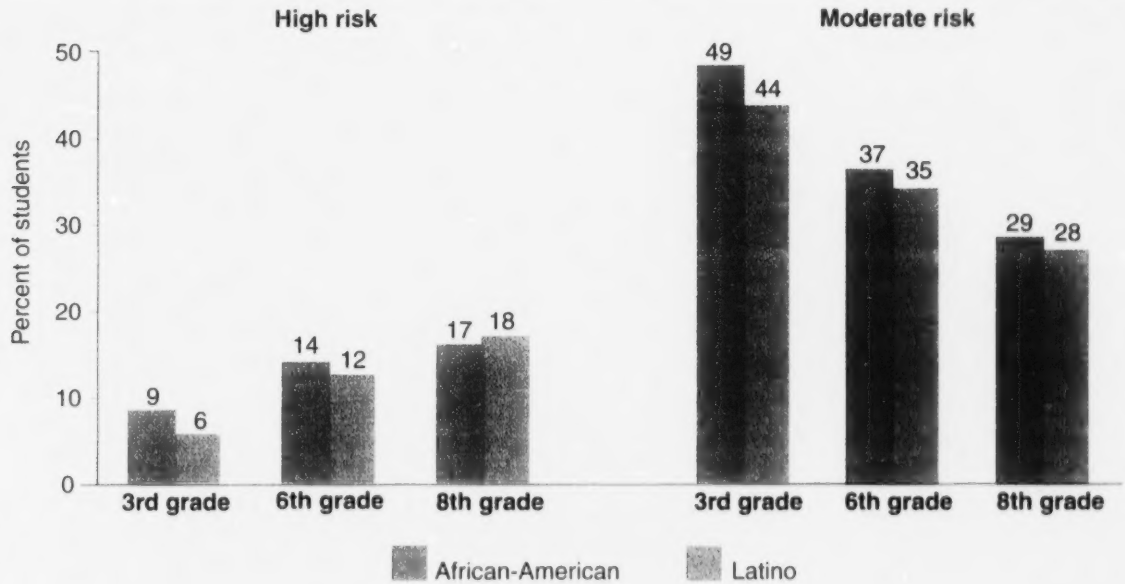
Figure 3-2

African-American and Latino Students at High and Moderate Risk of Failing
Third, Sixth, and Eighth Graders, 1997



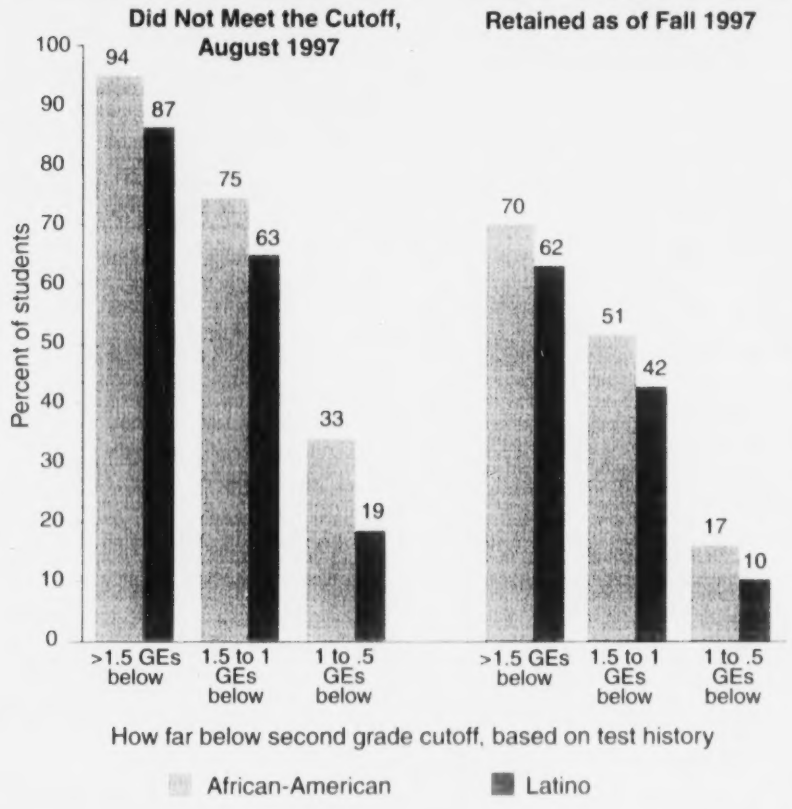
Note: High risk students are those whose predicted test scores indicate they would need to make up over 1.5 GEs in a year to make the test score cutoff. Moderate risk students are those who would have to make up .5 to 1.5 GEs in a year to make the cutoff.

from the policy, meaning that their promotional decisions were not strictly subject to the policy's set promotional criteria. As shown in Figure 3-1, a total of 62 percent of Latino third graders were excluded from the policy.

Among included students, African-American third graders were more likely to be at risk of failing to meet the promotional criteria. Using a statistical model for predicting the test-score gap that students would have to make up to meet the promotional test cutoff, 49 percent of African-American and 44 percent of Latino third graders would be considered at moderate to high risk under the policy. Another 9 percent of African-American third graders and 6 percent of Latino third graders were at high risk (see Figure 3-2). In addition, African-American students typically had somewhat lower testing gains during third grade. For example, among students who were moderately at risk of not meeting the cutoff, 75 percent of African-American third graders versus 63 percent of Latino students failed to meet the promotional cutoff in both May and August of 1997 (see Figure 3-3).

Figure 3-3

Percentage of High and Moderate Risk African-American and Latino Students Who Did Not Meet the Cutoff and Were Retained
Third Graders, 1997



How Did Ethnic Differences Impact Sixth Graders under the Policy?

Main finding: *The proportions of African-American and Latino sixth graders who were at risk under the policy were quite similar. In addition, there was little difference in passing rates within risk categories. African-American sixth graders were, however, much more likely to be retained, largely because in 1997 many Latino students were promoted despite having test scores below the cutoff.*

Latino students were again excluded at higher rates in the sixth grade. Approximately 23 percent of Latino sixth graders versus only 16 percent of African-American sixth graders were excluded from the promotional policy. Within risk categories, there was very little difference between the percentage of African-American and Latino students who failed to meet the promotional test cutoff. Importantly, however, African-American sixth graders were more likely to be retained, largely because of differences in promotion rates among those who did not meet the cutoff. For example, 73 percent of African-American and 74 percent of Latino sixth graders who had to make up 1.5 or more Grade Equivalents (GEs) to pass the cutoff failed to reach a 5.3 by August of 1997 (see Figure 3-4). Yet 55 percent of African-American students in this category versus 38 percent of Latinos were retained. This translates into a promotion rate among students who did not meet the cutoff of 25 percent for high risk African-American students versus 49 percent for Latinos.

One explanation for this result is that educators may have been particularly sensitive to the fact that students whose test scores were being counted for the first time—those who were entering their fourth year in bilingual education—might not do particularly well. We found, however, that Latino sixth graders were more likely to be promoted despite having test scores below the cutoff regardless of how long they had been in the system. If we look at the schools that received the most waivers in 1997, the majority were concentrated in neighborhoods that had high concentrations of Latino students (see Figure 3-5 on page 46).

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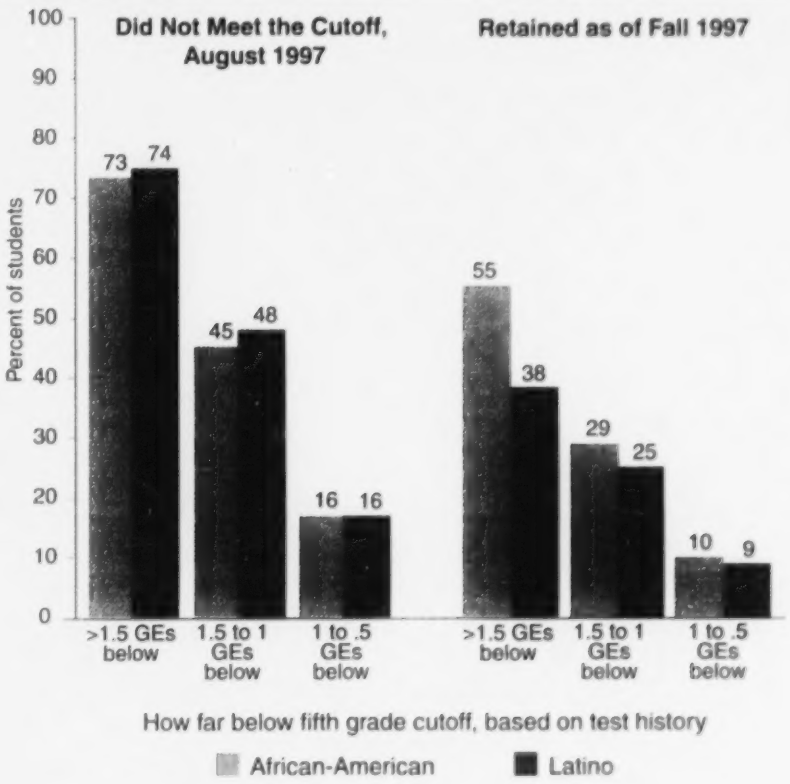
Figure 3-4

Percentage of High and Moderate Risk African-American and Latino Students Who Did Not Meet the Cutoff and Were Retained
Sixth Graders, 1997



How Did Ethnic Differences Impact Eighth Graders under the Policy?

Main finding: *There was little difference in the experience of Latino and African-American eighth graders. Retention rates were quite similar in eighth grade.*

We noted earlier that exclusion rates declined significantly in later grades because many more bilingual students were included under the policy, and the reason for exclusion shifted to special education. As a result, by eighth grade, there was little difference in the exclusion rate between African-American and Latino students. For students included in the policy, passing rates were quite comparable between the two groups (see Figure 3-6 on page 47). High risk Latino eighth graders were slightly more likely to be promoted despite not meeting the test cutoff in 1997, but this difference had only a moderate impact on the overall retention rate. Approximately 39 percent of high risk Latino eighth graders who did not meet the promotional criteria in August 1997 were promoted, versus 31 percent of high risk African-American eighth graders. In 1997, 14 percent of African-American eighth graders and 12 percent of Latino eighth graders were retained or sent to Transition Centers (see Figure 3-7 on page 48). Thus, the major difference between African-American and Latino students in both risk and performance occurred in the third grade.

Were There Gender Differences?

Main finding: *Across all grades, there were only small differences in the administrative treatment or in the performance of boys and girls under the promotional policy. Boys were retained at higher rates because they were, in general, farther behind on entry into those grades. In both the third and sixth grades, many more boys than girls faced high to moderate risk of not meeting the cutoff. Within risk categories, however, passing and retention rates were similar.*

Figure 3-5

Schools Promoting the Most 6th Graders below the Cutoff

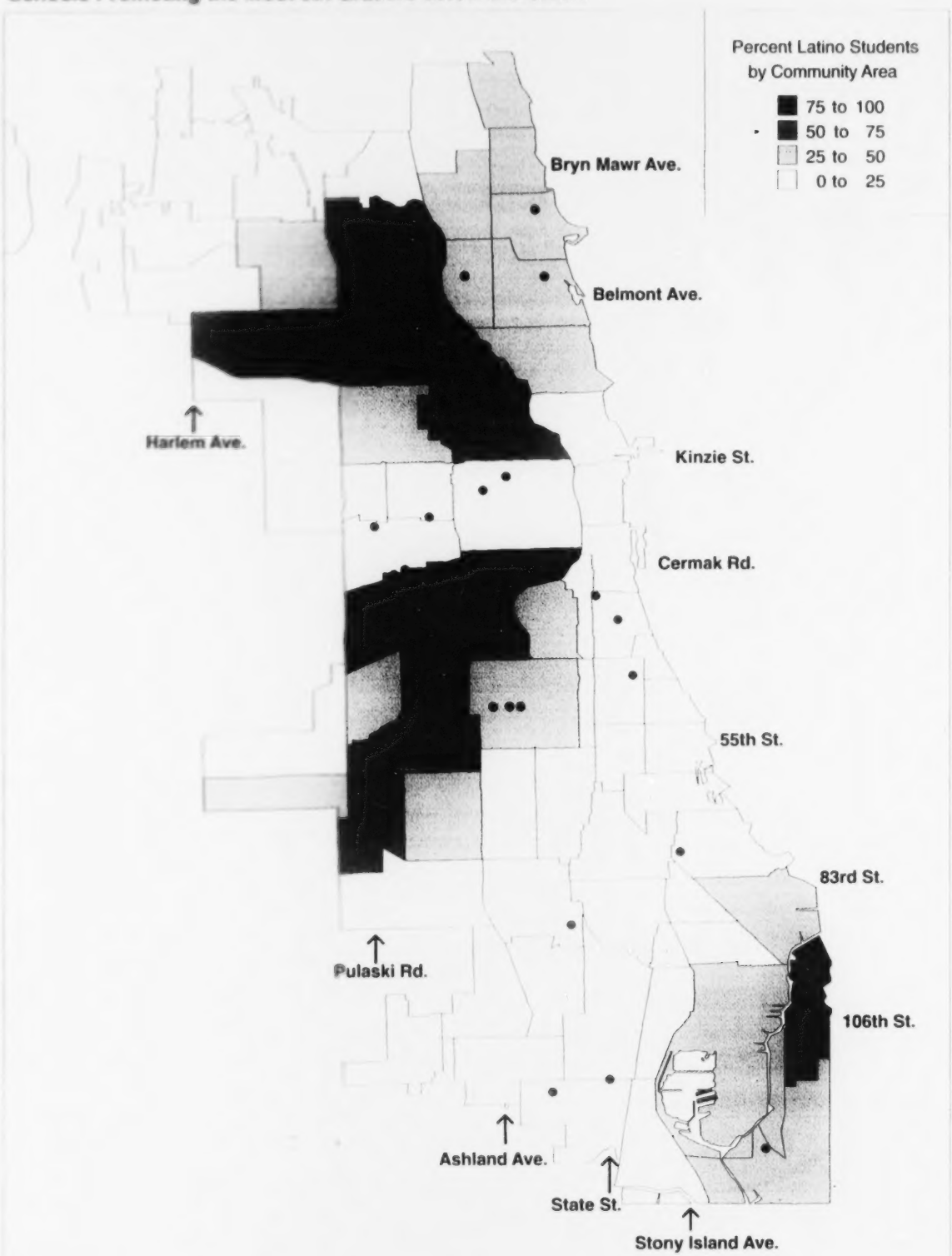


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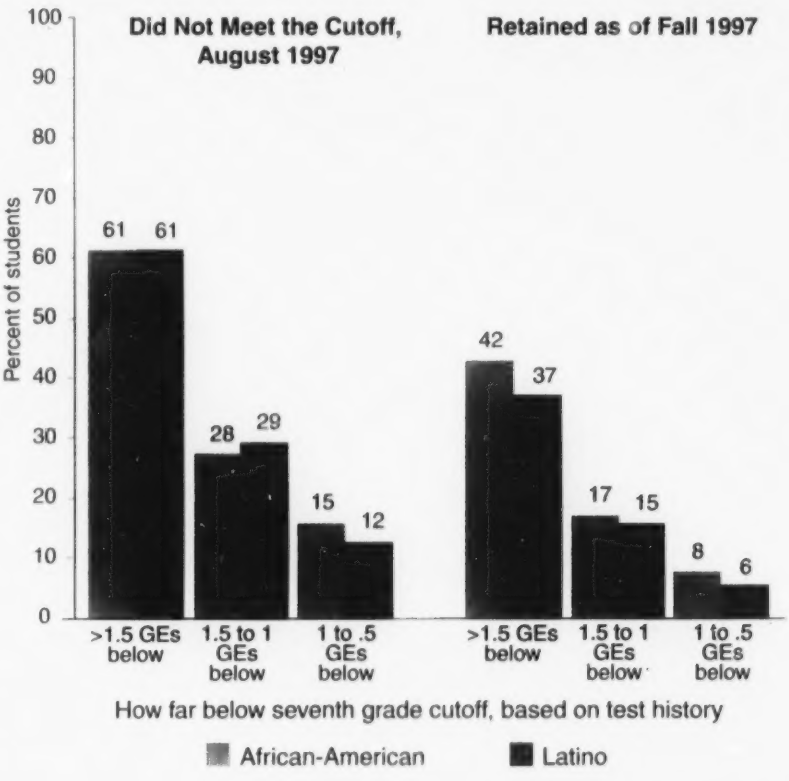
Figure 3-6

Percentage of High and Moderate Risk African-American and Latino Students Who Did Not Meet the Cutoff and Were Retained
Eighth Graders, 1997



Previous research on grade retention finds that boys are much more likely to be retained, particularly in the early grades.[21] Poor school performance and high dropout rates among minority males is a national concern. How have boys and girls fared under this policy?

Across all grades, boys were slightly more likely to be retained, with the largest difference occurring in the third grade. In third grade, 24 percent of boys versus 19 percent of girls were retained (see Figure 3-8 on page 48). There is a straightforward explanation for why this occurred: boys were farther behind upon entry into third grade and, therefore, faced a higher risk of not meeting the cutoff. Using a statistical estimate of how far behind the test-score cutoff students were upon entry into the promotional gate grade, 55 percent of third grade boys versus 50 percent of third grade girls faced moderate to high risk of not meeting the promotional criteria (see Figure 3-9 on page 49 for proportions in each category). Boys were also more likely to be at risk in the sixth and eighth grades.

Among students who faced similar test-score deficits, there were only moderate gender differences in the proportion of boys and girls who failed to meet the promotional criteria and who were retained. Thus, the issue of gender appears to be a broader issue of the poorer school performance of boys, particularly in the earlier grades, rather than an issue of differences in performance linked to the policy.

What Have We Learned?

The statistics presented in this section underscore the complexity of what it means to end social promotion in large urban school systems where an increasing number of students are immigrants who may be learning English while trying to gain the higher levels of basic skills now expected of all students. Chicago made the decision that students who were in bilingual education for fewer than three years would be exempted from the promotional policy. In 1999, this exclusion criterion was raised to four

Figure 3-7

Percent of African-American and Latino Students Retained
1997

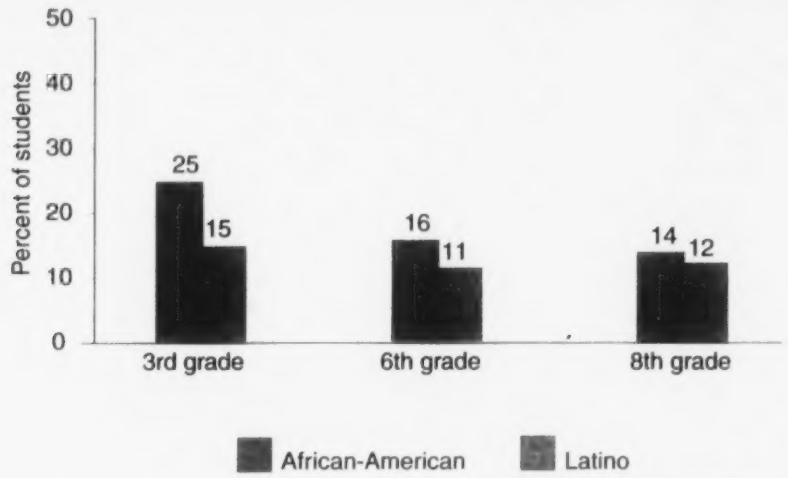
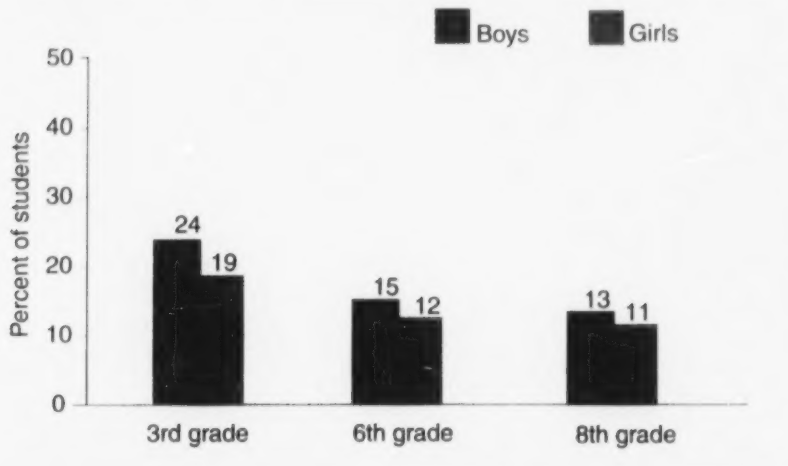


Figure 3-8

Percent of Students Retained by Gender
1997

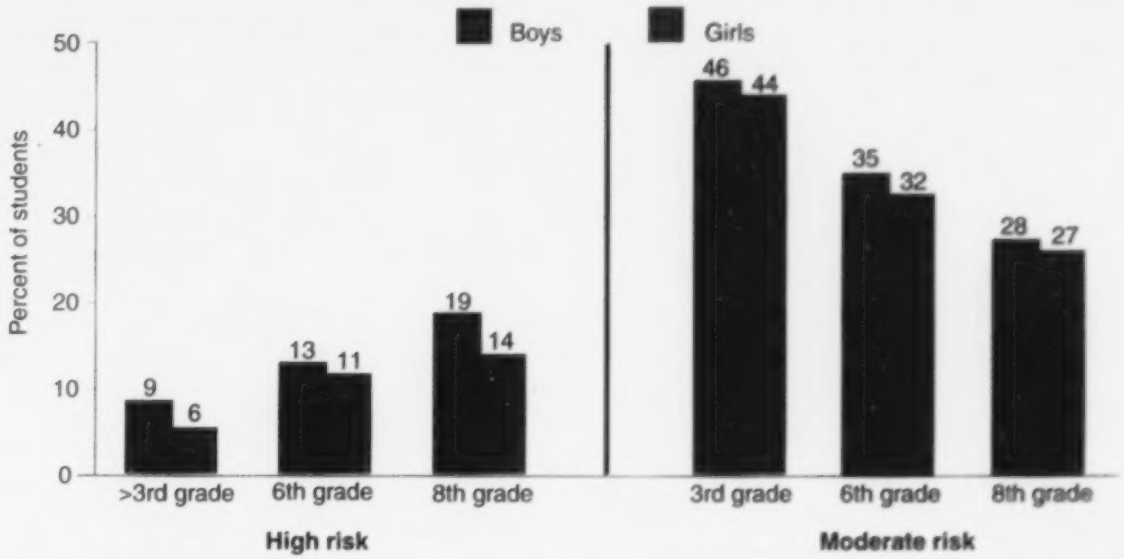


years. This means that the majority of Latino third graders and a high proportion of Latino sixth graders are excluded from the policy. This is an important trend given that Latinos are the fastest growing group of students in the Chicago Public Schools. It is beyond the scope of this report to address the question of whether excluding Latino students is the most educationally appropriate policy decision. Clearly, this policy gets at the heart of the ongoing debate over the rate at which language-minority students should move into English-speaking classrooms, and the rate at which those students should be expected to meet similar criteria to non-language-minority students for school performance.

What is clear is that the exclusion of Latino students in the early grades means schools with Latino student populations face a very different problem in the sixth and eighth grades than other schools. One argument for ending social promotion at the third grade is that early intervention will spur students to reach minimum standards and reduce their risk later on. But, as the policy currently stands, many Latino students in the Chicago Public

Figure 3-9

Boys and Girls at Risk for Not Meeting the Cutoff
Third, Sixth, and Eighth Graders, 1997



Note: High risk students are those whose predicted test scores indicate they would need to make up over 1.5 GEs in a year to make the test score cutoff. Moderate risk students are those who would have to make up .5 to 1.5 GEs in a year to make the cutoff.

Schools will not face these cutoffs until the sixth or even eighth grade. First, schools with Latino student populations should consider using the knowledge that students will eventually face the cutoffs and extend early supportive services to those who are excluded in the early grades. Second, Latino sixth and eighth grade teachers clearly face a more difficult problem because they must decide whether student deficits reflect a lack of language proficiency or another undiagnosed learning problem. Thus, schools with Latino student populations may need to direct extra resources and supports to these grades.

One of our reasons for looking at ethnic/racial differences in performance under the policy was to address the concern that Latino students, particularly more recent immigrants, would face a greater risk of retention. We find quite the opposite. First, among those students included under the policy, Latino students performed as well as, or, in the third grade, better than African-American students. And, second, we find that the implementation of the policy in Chicago appeared to be particularly sensitive to the impact of language proficiency on student performance. Most Latino third graders were excluded from the promotion criteria. In addition, a higher proportion of Latino than African-American students were promoted despite having test scores below the promotional criteria in August of 1997.

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INTERPRETIVE SUMMARY

Chicago's effort to end social promotion is an integrated set of initiatives designed to focus attention on lower performing students and raise their test scores to minimum promotional cutoffs—during the year before testing, over the summer, and for those who are retained, during the next year. By using minimum test scores as the criteria for promotion and by using the threat of retention if these criteria are not met, the initiative seeks to increase student effort and focus program resources and teacher attention on improving basic skills. Those third, sixth, and eighth graders who fail to meet the test cutoffs in May are given a second chance to meet the test criteria after more intensive instructional time in reading and mathematics in the Summer Bridge program. Most of those who fail again in August are retained. The initiative uses the retention year, combined with a second round of program supports, to try to redress continued poor performance.

This report has focused on three broad areas. First, it described the implementation of the policy during the first two years, examining the flows of students through the policy during 1997 and 1998. Second, it compared ITBS achievement trends for students affected by the policy to those of students before the policy was implemented and looked at trends in students' test performance in the year before and after promotion or retention. And, third, it examined ethnic and gender differences in the effects of the policy. This section is organized to summarize the main findings of the report and to highlight the questions they raise for policymakers both locally and nationally.

Testing the Theory of Action in Chicago: Were More Students Meeting the Test Cutoffs? The premise of the CPS policy for ending social promotion is that setting minimum test-score standards for promotion and providing extra instructional time to students during the school year and summer will allow more students to meet the minimum test cutoffs for their grade. We began to evaluate this claim by comparing the performance of students who were subject to the policy in 1997 and 1998 with that of a previous group of CPS students (third, sixth, and eighth graders in 1995) who were not subject to the promotional criteria.

There have been impressive increases in the proportion of students who meet minimum test-score cutoffs for promotion. Overall, many more students had ITBS scores that met the minimum cutoff required for promotion in 1997 and 1998 than did before the policy. In this respect, the CPS policy looks like a success. Increases in the sixth and eighth grades reflected both improvements in student performance during the school year and the effect of Summer Bridge. The proportion of all sixth graders who reached the minimum promotional cutoff was 20 percent higher in 1997 than in 1995 and 21 percent higher among eighth graders. In the second year of the policy, passing rates among sixth graders were even better.

[Perhaps] the most positive finding in this report is that across all three grades the Summer Bridge program . . . has been one of the most successful aspects of the policy . . .

Third grade is an area of concern. There was little increase in the proportion of third graders who met the minimum cutoff in reading from May 1995 to May 1997. The performance of third graders during the school year was better in 1998 than in 1997, but these improvements were largely concentrated among those students who had skill levels already close to the cutoff. More third graders eventually reached the promotional cutoff because of increases in their test scores after Summer Bridge. Indeed, perhaps the most positive finding in this report is that across all three grades the Summer Bridge program—and the second chance it affords—has been one of the most successful aspects of the policy, accounting for a large proportion of the improvements in passing rates.

The performance of students with low skills showed the greatest improvement. Most impressive is that increases in passing rates were greatest among students with the lowest skills. We called students *high* risk if they needed to increase their ITBS scores by 1.5 GEs or more in a year in order to meet the promotional test cutoff and *moderate* risk if they needed "average" to "above average" test score gains in the promotional testing year (.5 to 1.5 GEs). We used this wide category for moderate risk because there is so much test score fluctuation from year to year. In 1995, about half of students who had test scores from the previous year already close to the cutoff (about .5 GEs below) actually didn't meet the test score cutoff by the end of the school year.

Many CPS students fell into one of these risk categories. Almost half of third graders and almost 40 percent of sixth and eighth graders had such low reading scores that they could be considered at risk of failing to meet the promotional cutoffs. Among high risk students, the proportion who were able to meet the test cutoff increased from 4 to 34 percent among sixth graders and from 12 to 49 percent among eighth graders between 1995 and 1997.

The picture is mixed on whether getting students up to a test-score cutoff in one year allows them to do better the next year. The argument for getting more students to meet a minimum test score cutoff is that this lays the basis for long-term school success, while promoting them without basic skills places them in a position of falling farther behind. We took a preliminary look at this claim by comparing test score trends in the year before the promotional grade, over the summer, and in the year after retention and promotion for students in 1995 (pre-policy) and 1997 (first-year policy). The evidence here is quite mixed. The good news is that the larger proportion of students who made the cutoff in May 1997 had two-year test score gains that were comparable to the smaller proportion of students in 1995 who would have met the promotional cutoff had it been in place. This suggests that an increased number of students are now on track under the policy.

At the same time, however, large test score increases in Summer Bridge were not followed by improved performance the next year. While Summer Bridge raised students' performance briefly, there is no evidence that it altered the overall pattern of school-year achievement for these students. After Summer Bridge, students reverted to learning about as much the next year as they did previously. There are two explanations for this trend. First, it suggests that the increases we are seeing in Summer Bridge may reflect testing effects versus learning gains. The National Research Council raised this issue in their report on high stakes testing when they argued:

> *. . . the available data provide no means of distinguishing true increases in student learning from artifactual gains. Such gains would be expected from the combined effect of teaching to the test, repeated use of a similar test, and in the case of Summer Bridge program, the initial selection of students with low scores on the test.*[36]

While we can't speak to the first two of these criticisms, our forthcoming technical report on the Summer Bridge program will present a more rigorous analysis of test score increases that correct for these selection effects. This report finds that the estimated gains in test scores in Summer Bridge are slightly overestimated by simple descriptive data, but remain large and significant when more rigorous statistical methods are used.

A second interpretation of Summer Bridge test score gains may be that raising skills during the summer does not carry over to the next school year as much as has been anticipated. As a result, Summer Bridge, at least in the short run, allowed students to stay on track by compensating for poor school-year gains with large summer gains. Trends in test scores among students promoted after Summer Bridge are certainly positive when compared to the experience of students who were previously socially promoted. Nonetheless, these students' weak school-year gains relative to summer meant that they remained at risk for retention the next time they faced the test cutoff. This second interpretation suggests that positive summer experiences cannot compensate for weak school-year instruction and that these students need improved instruction across their school careers. It may also suggest that students in Summer Bridge may be a particularly vulnerable group of students who might well need sustained attention across their school careers.

What Do We Know about the Progress of Retained Students?

This report also addressed the most controversial aspect of the promotional policy: the decision to retain students. Even if the policy produces benefits for students who are promoted, the continued feasibility of this initiative will ultimately depend on whether CPS can effectively address poor performance among students who are retained. Results from the first group of retained students are far from sanguine. Only one-fourth of retained eighth graders and one-third of retained third and sixth graders in 1997 made "normal" progress during the following school year, meaning that they stayed in the school system, were again subject to the policy, and passed the test cutoff the next May.

Thus, retained students did not do better than previously socially promoted students. The progress among retained third graders was most troubling. Over the two years between the end of second grade and the end of the second time through third grade, the average ITBS reading scores of these students increased only 1.2 GEs compared to 1.5 GEs for students with similar test scores who had been promoted prior to the policy.

Also troubling is that one-year dropout rates among eighth graders with low skills are higher under this policy. We will be continuing to chart the progress of this group during 1999, when those students will turn 16 and face the time when dropping out normally begins to occur.

How do we interpret the performance of retained students? In short, Chicago has not solved

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the problem of poor performance among those who do not meet the minimum test cutoffs and are retained. Both the history of prior attempts to redress poor performance with retention and previous research would clearly have predicted this finding. Few studies of retention have found positive impacts, and most suggest that retained students do no better than socially promoted students. This is clearly the most difficult problem to address. The CPS policy now highlights a group of students who are facing significant barriers to learning and are falling farther and farther behind. These students are now identified as not meeting the promotional criteria and are retained, while in the past they were socially promoted. How best to advance the learning of students whose test scores are not improving remains unclear.

The administration clearly needs to take a close look at the adequacy of its current efforts in the retained year. CPS has continued to experiment with alternatives to retention and with directing resources to students in the second year. At present, students in the retained year are provided with substantial extra resources through Lighthouse, reduced class sizes, and extra instructional support in schools hit hard by retention. In our subsequent work, we will be looking specifically at how these various interventions in the retained year—Lighthouse, mid-year promotions, and placement of students in smaller classes—may shape students' learning in comparison to students who are simply retained and placed in regular classrooms. The current strategy, however, of using Lighthouse, a second summer of Summer Bridge, and a second time through the policy, amounts to a double dose of the same medicine the students received the year before. We find that retained students showed little progress in the year after retention and during Summer Bridge. If incentives, extra instructional time, and a summer program did not work to improve these students' skills the first time around, will a second year of the same program produce greater benefits? This policy—because it identifies students who don't meet the test cutoff—provides an opportunity to clearly diagnose these students' problems and provide more intensive interventions during the second year. Doing so, however, may require a different approach than that used in the first year. It may also require more sustained intervention in particular schools.

How do we interpret the weaker effect of the policy in the third grade? Another key finding in this report is that the performance of third graders was significantly poorer under this policy than that of sixth and eighth graders. In some ways, this finding is surprising. The rhetoric of early intervention surmises that intervening in sixth and eighth grade would be too late to remediate poor skills. In retrospect, however, the initial design of this policy may be more appropriate for older students.

In short, Chicago has not solved the problem of poor performance among those who do not meet the minimum test cutoffs and are retained.

The CPS initiative relies heavily on incentives for students to work harder and on producing large gains in short intensive periods such as summer school. In this respect, the finding about third graders might not be surprising. Eighth graders face the greatest costs in not meeting the test cutoff (they don't go on to high school) and have the greatest capacity to shape their school performance through their own motivation and effort. It might also be true that eighth graders are at a time in their development when they can more easily learn in intensive periods of immersion. In contrast, third graders may be less sensitive to the threat of retention, less able to shape their own learning by effort, and less likely to overcome barriers through intensive learning spurts.[37]

Raising students' skills in the early grades may require a different approach. The CPS administration's

current strategy in addressing the poorest performers among third graders is to extend the program without retention into the earlier grades. Beginning in the 1999-2000 school year, the Lighthouse and Summer Bridge programs have been extended to first and second grade students who are not at grade level. This means that the administration has extended the school day and school year for at risk students for three years prior to the test cutoff in third grade.

Another and not mutually exclusive response to the poorer outcomes among third graders would be to focus more attention on improving the core instructional capacity of teachers in the early grades. In general, CPS has used a strategy of supplementing instruction by increasing instructional time in after-school programs and during the summer. CPS has also tried to infuse the instructional strategy used in these programs (the centrally developed curriculum) into the school year. Thus the administration has worked to raise test scores among low-performing students without having to address questions regarding the adequacy of instruction during the school day or spend resources to increase teachers' capacity to teach and to meet students' needs more successfully.

Another key finding in this report is that the performance of third graders was significantly poorer under this policy than that of sixth and eighth graders.

Taken together, one interpretation of the findings of this report is that the CPS social promotion policy has worked to reveal a core problem—the adequacy of instruction during the school year. If this is indeed a problem, then the ultimate success of this policy will depend upon whether the extra program efforts and extra efforts on the part of students are matched with an increase in the capacity of teachers to build early literacy and numeracy and to diagnose and address students' problems when they are not progressing.

Putting the Findings of the Report in Context: The Chicago Approach to Ending Social Promotion

One of the purposes of this report was to set out for a national audience the various components of the Chicago policy and its implementation process during its first two years. As we noted in the Introduction, all eyes are on Chicago in this regard. CPS has embarked on a rigorous attempt to raise standards by focusing on individual student performance. This policy is often described as a "get tough" approach, but our look at the design and implementation of the policy finds that there are two aspects of Chicago's efforts often overlooked in the national debate. First, the initial design of the policy reflected a concern that students who are bilingual and those who have special education needs should not be held to the same strict standards as other students in their grade. As a result, almost one-third of third graders were initially excluded from the promotion policy. In the first two years, the administration also liberally used waivers, particularly among Latino students, both prior to the retention/promotion decision and in assessing the progress of retained students the second time through this policy. The use of waivers, or of promoting students who did not meet the minimum test score cutoff, allowed Chicago to substantially reduce the proportion of students who were retained. Without such flexibility in the Chicago policy, its initial impact would have been much more disconcerting.

We do not mean to suggest that Chicago should end waivers or have all students included under the policy. Rather, we argue that the simplistic "sound bites" and rhetoric often used by those on both sides of the debate to characterize Chicago's efforts are misleading and ultimately dysfunctional. Such over-simplification

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Sidebar 4

Many Questions Still Unanswered: Next Research Steps

This report is the first in a series of investigations from a multi-year study of Chicago's promotion policy. The study brings together analysis of achievement and high school transcript data; ongoing surveys of teachers and students conducted in 1994, 1997, and 1999; and a qualitative study of the experience of 100 students, their families, and teachers under the policy during the 1998-1999 and 1999-2000 school years.

Our intent in this first report is simply to describe the general landscape of an important reform effort. As we expected, these initial findings raise many more questions than they answer. In subsequent reports we will probe issues such as effects of the policy on long-term student achievement trends and high school completion rates, on the changing nature of classroom instruction, on parental involvement, and on students' own attitudes. We will conduct a cost study to evaluate the benefits of this approach versus other alternative methods of improving student performance in both the early and middle school years. We also expect that public discussions following the release of the report will sharpen our current research agenda on this topic and likely reshape it in important ways as well.

Subsequent reports will take several forms. First, we are already at work on three technical briefs that offer more detailed statistical analyses of the nature of achievement gains associated with the policy. Second, future yearly follow-up reports will present updated information on students' flows through the policy and will track the learning trajectories of students over time. And, third, subsequent public reports will focus on the following issues:

A Closer Look at Summer Bridge. The large increases in test scores associated with Summer Bridge suggest we take a closer look at this program. Several key features may be contributing to these increases: substantially reduced class sizes, the selective recruitment of teachers for the program, a standardized curriculum aligned to the ITBS, and more intensive and effective use of instructional time. We will be reporting on the characteristics of teachers who teach in the program versus those in the regular school year and will be looking at how students view their experience in the summer. Finally, we will be looking more carefully at the characteristics of students who made and did not make substantial learning gains during the summer and at characteristics that allowed some Summer Bridge sites to be more effective than others.

This Summer Bridge report, along with our technical report on Summer Bridge learning gains, will focus on problems in interpreting test score increases in summer programs when there are potential important testing effects that might lead to overestimates of program impacts.

Looking inside the Box: Effects on Instruction and Professional Practice. A key question surrounding CPS's promotional initiative is its effects on classroom instruction. Many educators worry that the policy encourages emphasis on test preparation and basic skills and diminishes attention to other subject matter and more complex academic skills. On the other hand, by design the policy is intended to redirect instructional resources to accelerate the progress of students who need help and, by reducing the spread of achievement in post-promotional grades, allow teachers to intensify the pace of subsequent instruction. In this report, we will use longitudinal survey data on teachers' reports of content coverage, pedagogical practices, instructional pacing, and time spent on test preparation to examine how the policy may be shaping instructional practices.

A Closer Look at Retention. We found in this report that students who were retained under the policy had very poor learning gains in the year before promotion, during the summer, and in the retention year. Many had a hard time reaching the test score standard even after an additional school year and summer of instruction. These findings call for a more intensive investigation of this aspect of the program. We will look more closely at the educational histories of these students to see if there are any clues which suggest how schools might be able to intervene earlier and more effectively. We will also look more closely at how schools are programming for these children. Preliminary analysis suggests considerable variability among schools in how much students are gaining on the ITBS during their retained year.

* * * * *

In the spirit of opening the public discussion about this most important CPS policy, we welcome your reactions to these ideas and specifically invite your suggestions on where we should go next. We will be maintaining a running commentary on our web site, **www.consortium-chicago.org**, about this report and our future research. We welcome your comments.

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encourages critics to ignore the complex evolving nature of the policy and the serious commitment it signals to raising student achievement and providing extra supports for students at every stage of the learning process. It also encourages other districts to truly "end social promotion" without any of the safety nets, supplemental education resources, and attention to refining the policy at work in Chicago. The Chicago experience demonstrates the realities of urban education, where high rates of immigration and the complexities of children's lives substantially complicate the idea of setting test cutoffs and then easily applying them. National efforts spurred on by the politically appealing rhetoric of "get tough" policies will be misguided if they do not also pay attention to the importance of flexibility at the local level, particularly as policies interact with sensitive terrains like bilingual education.

Second, we emphasized that early experience with the Chicago policy drives home the importance of carefully setting test scores for promotion, paying attention at each step along the way to which students the policy applies to, attending to the needs of those students who do not meet cutoffs, and committing resources to programmatic initiatives. One point stands out clearly: The CPS is committing enormous fiscal resources to this initiative in the form of extended day programs, summer school, and extra years of school with reduced class sizes. While a full accounting of the specific consequences of each of these initiatives will take several more years to accrue, even at this relatively early juncture one observation for other districts is clear. Do not attempt to implement this policy unless your school district is willing to invest, as Chicago has, substantial fiscal and administrative resources.

How is this policy changing? From the perspective of CPS leadership, an important and often overlooked characteristic of the Chicago effort is that the policy is intended to evolve over time. This has important implications for our research because we are studying a moving target. CPS is making continued efforts to fine-tune the policy. Many of the issues documented in this report have already been recognized and in some cases new directions have been taken. For example, in the year 2000 all CPS first and second graders who have ITBS scores below grade level will be required to participate in Summer Bridge in an effort to address the relatively poor effects of the policy in the third grade. In addition, the CPS continues to raise the test-score cutoff. In 1999-2000, the test scores required for promotion will be raised in all three gate grades.

Do not attempt to implement this policy unless your school district is willing to invest, as Chicago has, substantial fiscal and administrative resources.

Perhaps the most important change in the policy is the administration's plan to move beyond simple test-score cutoffs for promotion to more inclusive criteria that will include grades, attendance, and learning gains during the school year. In this way, the administration hopes to allow students to garner the benefit of promotional cutoffs while simultaneously rewarding students for effort and demonstrated performance and correcting the deficits of a policy that relies on a narrow and crude indicator of performance such as the ITBS.

This is an approach that would clearly be supported by many of the critics of the policy as well as testing experts who caution strongly against sole reliance on ITBS Grade Equivalents to make promotional decisions (see Sidebar 4).[38] The primary reliance on a single ITBS score, coupled with waivers, was expedient in initiating the policy, but may not continue to serve the system well. The use of the term "waiver" introduces a sense of arbitrariness and serves to undermine what appears to be the goal of minimizing retention

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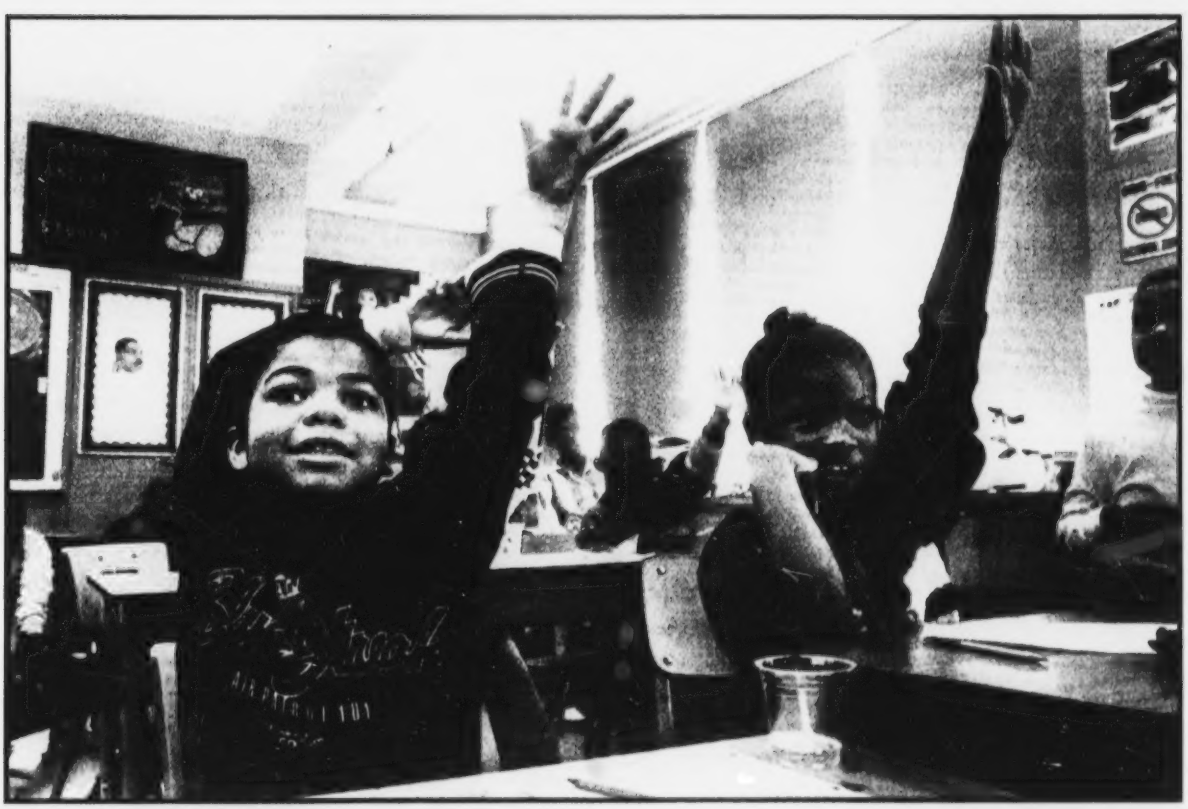
while using more inclusive criteria for promotion. A reformulating of the promotional criteria may be in order. In particular, CPS might consider uncoupling the criteria for participation in programs with the criteria for promotion or retention. The use of a single test score for participation in Summer Bridge, Lighthouse, and intervention programs is administratively easy to implement. But, it is clearly time for the administration to move forward with a more systematic formula for the promotional decision that formally allows for students' grades, attendance, and learning growth. In this study, we have also shown how the accuracy of test scores can be improved by using students' previous test score histories. All of these indices could be formulated into a standard, more accurate and more defensible promotional policy that continues to send a strong message to students, parents, and teachers about the importance of effort and achievement.

A more systematic formula for promotion would also allow the policy to be implemented in a way that clearly communicates goals to teachers and schools and ensures that all students who might be eligible for promotion under more inclusive criteria are promoted. Our look at racial and ethnic differences in the first year of the policy suggests that without such a concerted and standardized approach, questions of equity regarding waivers and retention may become a significant concern.



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Concluding Comments

This report provided a first look at the implementation of Chicago's efforts to end social promotion. We relied largely on descriptive analysis in order to make the findings as accessible as possible to a broad audience. We are already engaged in more systematic analysis of each of the main findings in order to derive more precise answers to questions such as: What exactly is the effect of the policy on learning gains in the year before testing? What do we know about learning gains in the Summer Bridge program? And, to what extent are retained students' learning trajectories different from those of students who were socially promoted in the years before the policy?

Our findings highlight the central tension that any school system will face in trying to raise achievement among low-performing students by using the threat of retention as a motivating factor. On the one hand, more students are now meeting a minimum test criteria for promotion. On the other hand, we find very troubling trends in the performance of retained students. And while Summer Bridge substantially helps many students, it does not appear to be enough.

In the end, the verdict is out on whether Chicago's initiatives are producing substantial benefits for students. Many of the main trends presented in this report will become clearer with another year of data collection. This additional year's worth of data will allow us to get a better look at the test score trends of students promoted after Summer Bridge, of retained students, and of students who initially met the test cutoffs in May. Time will also allow us to determine whether schools are able to sustain efforts and whether problems can be identified early on and more effectively addressed. For this reason, a number of follow-up reports will be forthcoming. It is still quite early in this evaluation to make statements about whether the policy is working.

But policy time and research time are often not on the same clock. This report is intended to provide information that documents potential positive effects and identifies problems and issues with which educators and policymakers still need to grapple without providing definitive statements about their effects. Over the long term, the substantial expense of this policy raises this question of opportunity costs: Is this the best use of scarce resources to improve student learning? And, do the benefits of the policy (more students meeting minimum standards) come at a cost, and if so, for whom? Many opponents of the policy worry that the narrow focus on raising ITBS scores in reading and math will substantially limit opportunities to learn in the Chicago Public Schools. The nature of the instructional effects of this policy will be one of the most important areas to assess in order to truly understand the positive and negative impacts of such high-stakes testing approaches to raising standards. A cost-analysis and a look at instruction effects will be the topic of subsequent reports.

In closing, we expect that this report will raise more questions than we have actually answered here. This is not unusual during the first stage of an important research program. We hope that public debate around these findings will shape and sharpen the research that follows.

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ENDNOTES

[1] It is important to recognize, however, that there is no agreed upon definition of the term "social promotion." In this report, we define the term quite literally. Social promotion is making the decision to promote a student on the basis of their social development. The implication of the term social promotion is that students are being promoted without reaching minimum standards for their grade.

[2] Hauser (1999). The National Research Council was organized by the National Academy of Sciences in 1916.

[3] Hoover, Hieronymus, Frisbie, and Dunbar (1996).

[4] Heubert and Hauser (1999).

[5] In 1997, Transition Center students were allowed to retake the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS) in January. In 1998, this third chance was expanded to all grades. Students who pass the test cutoff at the end of the first semester are promoted at the beginning of the second semester with a required double (six hours per day) summer school at the end of the year.

[6] Hauser (1999), Heubert and Hauser (1999), Holmes (1989), Holmes and Matthews (1984), House (1998), Jackson (1975), and Shepard, Smith, and Marion (1996).

[7] Barro and Kolstad (1987); Byrnes (1989); Gottfredson, Fink, and Graham (1994); Grissom and Shepard (1989); Hauser (1999); Heubert and Hauser (1999); Hess and Lauber (1985); Holmes and Matthews (1984); House (1998); New York City Board of Education, Office of Educational Assessment (1988); Plummer and Graziano (1987); Roderick (1994).

[8] Tomchin and Impara (1992).

[9] House (1998) and New York City Board of Education (1988).

[10] Hauser (1999).

[11] Fusaro (1997), Levin and Tsang (1987), and Smith (1998).

[12] Entwisle, Alexander, and Olson (1997); Heyns (1987).

[13] In 1998, the promotional test cutoff for eighth graders was raised from 7.0 to 7.2, and then to 7.4 in 1999. In the year 2000, the minimum cutoffs will be raised for both sixth and eighth graders.

[14] The promotional decisions of special education students are based on individual promotion plans that may include test scores as part of the criteria for promotion. We call students *included* if their promotional decisions were strictly based on the test-score cutoff. From 1996 through 1998, students were excluded if they were enrolled in a bilingual education program and if they had been enrolled for less than three complete years as of the prior September 30. In 1999, that criteria was changed to four years.

[15] All students referred to in this section of the report are students who were included under the policy.

[16] These retention rates are for the proportion of included students retained under the policy.

[17] The number of retained students (10,119) and the number of promoted students (5, 793) do not add up to the total number of students eligible for retention (16,744) because 832 students who were eligible for retention left the school system before promotion or retention.

[18] *Guidelines for Promotion in the Chicago Public Schools*, p. 17.

[19] In this report, we calculated waiver rates as the proportion of students who were promoted despite failing to meet the promotional criteria by August. For example, in 1997, 7,650 third graders who were included under the policy did not meet promotional criteria in both subjects. Of these students, 4,796 were retained, 2,497 were promoted, and 357 left the school system. Thus, for third graders, the waiver rate excluding students who left the system is 34 percent.

[20] We restricted the waiver calculation only to those who did not leave the school system. Among sixth graders, for example, 2,031 received waivers, and 3,035 were retained (see Figure 1-3). Thus, the waiver rate can be calculated as the percent waived out of the 5, 066 eligible for retention, in this case 40 percent.

[21] This exclusion rate during the 1998 year is calculated without those students who left the school system.

[22] There is a fear that schools will use special education placements to exempt students from the policy. On the other hand, these placements may also signify that the policy is finally leading teachers to pay closer attention and better diagnose students' problems, resulting in much needed referrals. While this does not resolve the debate over whether more diagnoses should be happening, clearly these exclusion rates are not evidence of widespread use of placing retained students in special education.

[23] In this section we calculate passing rates on the basis of the progress of all retained students, including those who were excluded from the policy. We do this because exclusion in the second year is part of the outcome for students who are retained.

[24] In this section of the report, passing, waiver, and retention rates for 1997 refer to the 1996-1997 school year, and rates for 1998 refer to the 1997-1998 school year. Since passing can occur during May or August, and since waivers and retentions occur during August only, the end-of-school-year dates were used to simplify the time line.

[25] The CPS administration has argued that waivers should become more prevalent over time as the bar is raised and as other indicators of performance, such as grades, become more reliable indicators of school performance. In 2000 when the bar is raised in all three grades, the administration has stated that students will be given extra leniency in passing these higher bars because grades, attendance, and learning growth over the school year will be given more weight in the promotional decision. This policy, however, has not yet been formalized or implemented. ("It's Time to Evolve: Paul Vallas Says as He Finishes Four Years." *Catalyst: Voices of Chicago School Reform.* June 1999.)

[26] During the 1994-1995 school year, the year before the policy was put in place, the average third grader increased his or her reading and math ITBS scores by approximately seven months between the end of second grade and the end of third grade. The average testing gains for sixth graders were eight months in reading and 1.06 years in math. Testing gains for eighth graders were 1.1 years in reading and 1.6 years in math.

[27] Given the testing gains outlined in Endnote 1, it might seem confusing to consider students at risk if they need only one-half to one year test-score gains in the third, sixth or eighth grade. As seen in Figure 2-1, however, in 1995 only slightly more than half of these students actually met the promotional criteria. This reflects year-to-year fluctuations in ITBS scores that result in many who are close to the cutoff remaining at risk.

[28] A subsequent technical report will present a more rigorous statistical model to estimate the addition to test-score gains associated with the policy in the year before testing. This model uses data from 1990-1997 students. Thus, we compare testing gains in the third, sixth, and eighth grades to those observed in several groups of students in these grades prior to the policy rather than in just one year, 1995. This model also allows us to adjust for trends in achievement test scores across all grades in the school system. In general, the results of this more rigorous analysis are consistent with the descriptive results presented here.

[29] Prior work of the Consortium found that student testing gains began increasing in the Chicago Public Schools in the early 1990s. Throughout this decade, test scores in mathematics have been rising steadily, where reading improvements have been more moderate. Test score increases over time, then, reflect both a residual reform effect from the first wave of Chicago school reform and the effect of broader reform efforts instituted at the same time as the promotional policy such as the effect of putting schools on probation.

[30] This statistical model fits a linear growth curve to students' testing trends in the years prior to the policy. For example, for sixth graders, we use students' reading scores from first through fifth grade to obtain an estimate of students' average testing gains across years. Using this model, we then predict a student's fifth grade test score based on their average test-score growth in the years prior to the policy. Thus, if a student had an abnormally low or high fifth grade test score, our model will correct for this.

[31] Again, the 1997 and 1995 designations used in this section refer to students who took the ITBS in May or August 1997 or in May 1995. These students began the school year in 1996 and 1994, respectively.

[32] As we saw in the previous section, most students who failed to meet the test cutoff in May participated in Summer Bridge (over 80 percent). In this graph, we restricted ourselves to these students so that we could look at test-score gains during Summer Bridge compared to the school year.

[33] When looking at the dropout rates, we acknowledge one possibility that might be occurring–students who would have eventually dropped out may be dropping out earlier. That is, the overall dropout rate could remain constant even if the timing of dropout changes.

[34] The number of Latino students in the Chicago Public Schools has been increasing rapidly while the African-American student population has been declining. From the 1984-1985 to the 1996-1997 school year, the number of Latino children in the Chicago Public Schools increased by 43.5 percent or by nearly 41,000 students.

[35] Heubert and Hauser (1999), and Roderick (1995).

[36] Heubert and Hauser (1999), p. 132.

[37] Another interpretation of the differences in the effect across grades, however, might be that the policy is being applied to different groups of students across grades. Specifically, in the first section of this report, we found that the reasons that students were excluded from the policy differed across grades. In the third grade, most student were excluded because of bilingual education status, and by eighth grade most student were excluded because of special education status. This means that the high risk group in the third grade most likely contained students who would later be excluded from the policy. Thus, the policy could be having less of an effect on high risk third graders because students with the most severe difficulties, those who might later be placed in special education, were included in the third grade but excluded later on. This interpretation underscores the importance of moving away from the double dose approach in the retained year to spending more time, particularly in the early grades, closely diagnosing students' learning problems.

[38] Bryk et al. (1998), Hoover et al. (1996), and Heubert and Hauser (1999).

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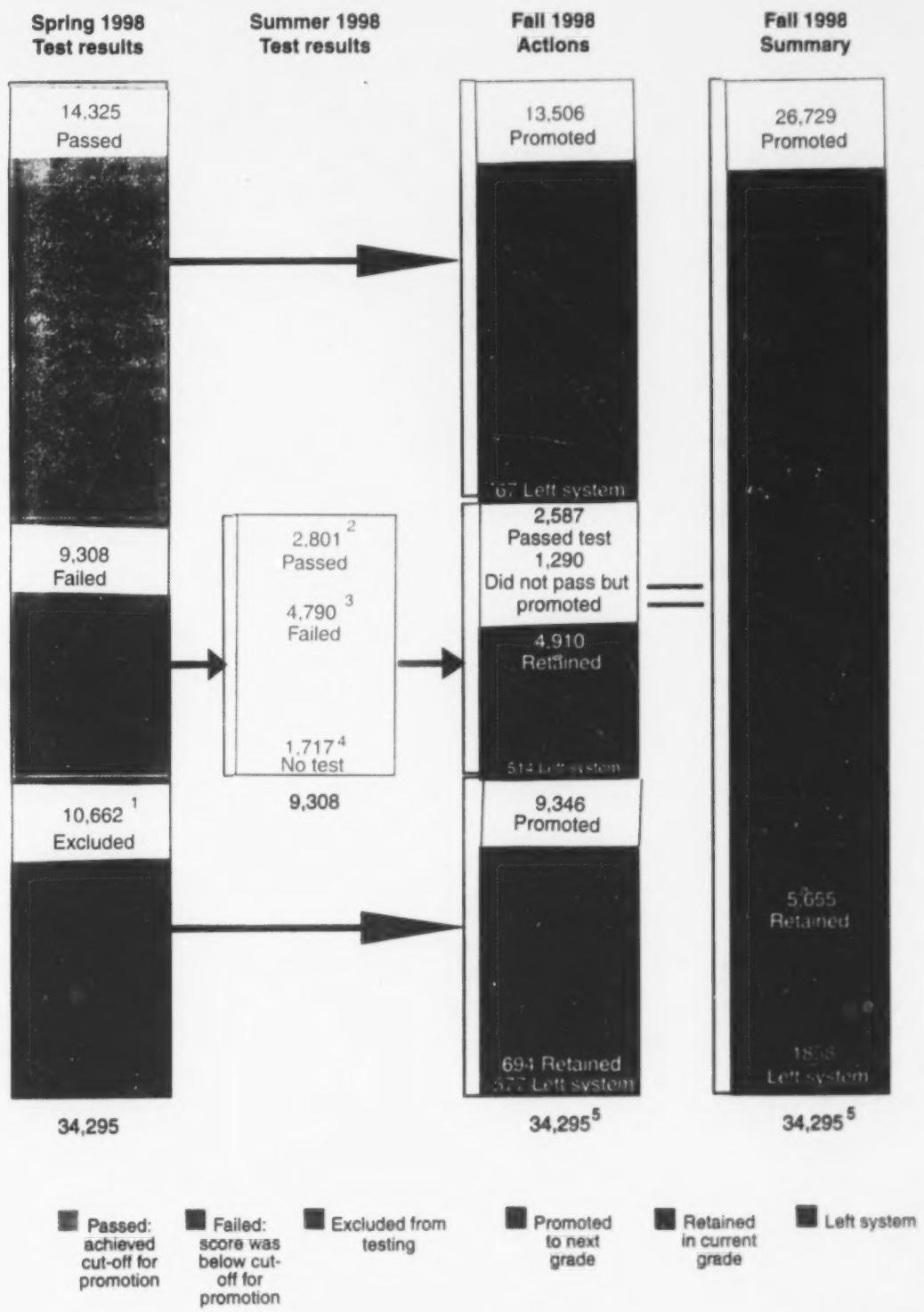
APPENDIX

Figure A

Spring 1998 Test Results
First Time Third Graders



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Spring 1998 Test Results

First Time Third Graders

Details

[1] The excluded category includes students who took the test, but whose scores were excluded from reporting, and students who did not take the test. Of those students who took the test, the test scores of 4,619 students were excluded from reporting. Of these, 2,323 were bilingual, 2,034 were special education, and 262 were both bilingual and special education students. An additional 6,043 students did not take the test, perhaps because of special education or bilingual status.

[2] 2,587 of the 2,801 students who passed Summer Bridge in 1998 were promoted, 112 were retained, and 102 left the system.

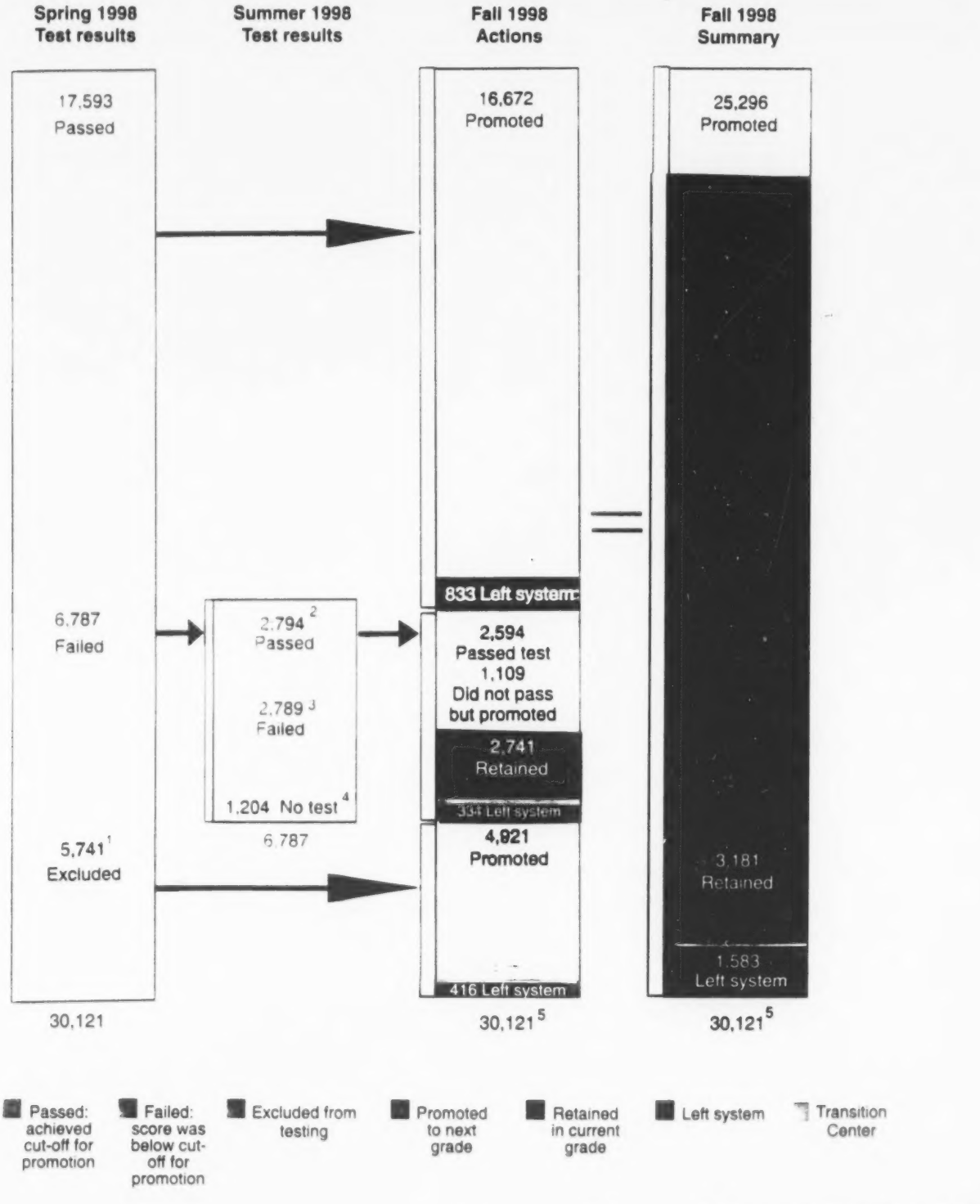
[3] 801 of the 4,790 students who failed Summer Bridge were promoted, 3,794 were retained, 193 left the system, and 2 moved into non-graded special education.

[4] 489 of the 1,717 students who did not take the test in Summer Bridge were promoted, 1,004 were retained, 219 left the system, and 5 moved into non-graded special education.

[5] The numbers in this column do not add up to exactly 34,295 because 53 students moved into non-graded special education between the two semesters.

Figure B

Spring 1998 Test Results
First Time Sixth Graders



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Spring 1998 Test Results

First Time Sixth Graders

Details

[1] The excluded category includes students who took the test but whose scores were excluded from reporting, and students who did not take the test. Of these students who took the test, the test scores of 4,048 students were excluded from reporting. Of these, 362 were bilingual, 3,653 were special education, and 33 were both bilingual and special education students. An additional 1,693 students did not take the test, perhaps because of special education or bilingual status.

[2] 2,594 of 2,794 students who passed Summer Bridge in 1998 were promoted, 108 were retained, 90 left the system, and 2 entered Transition Centers.

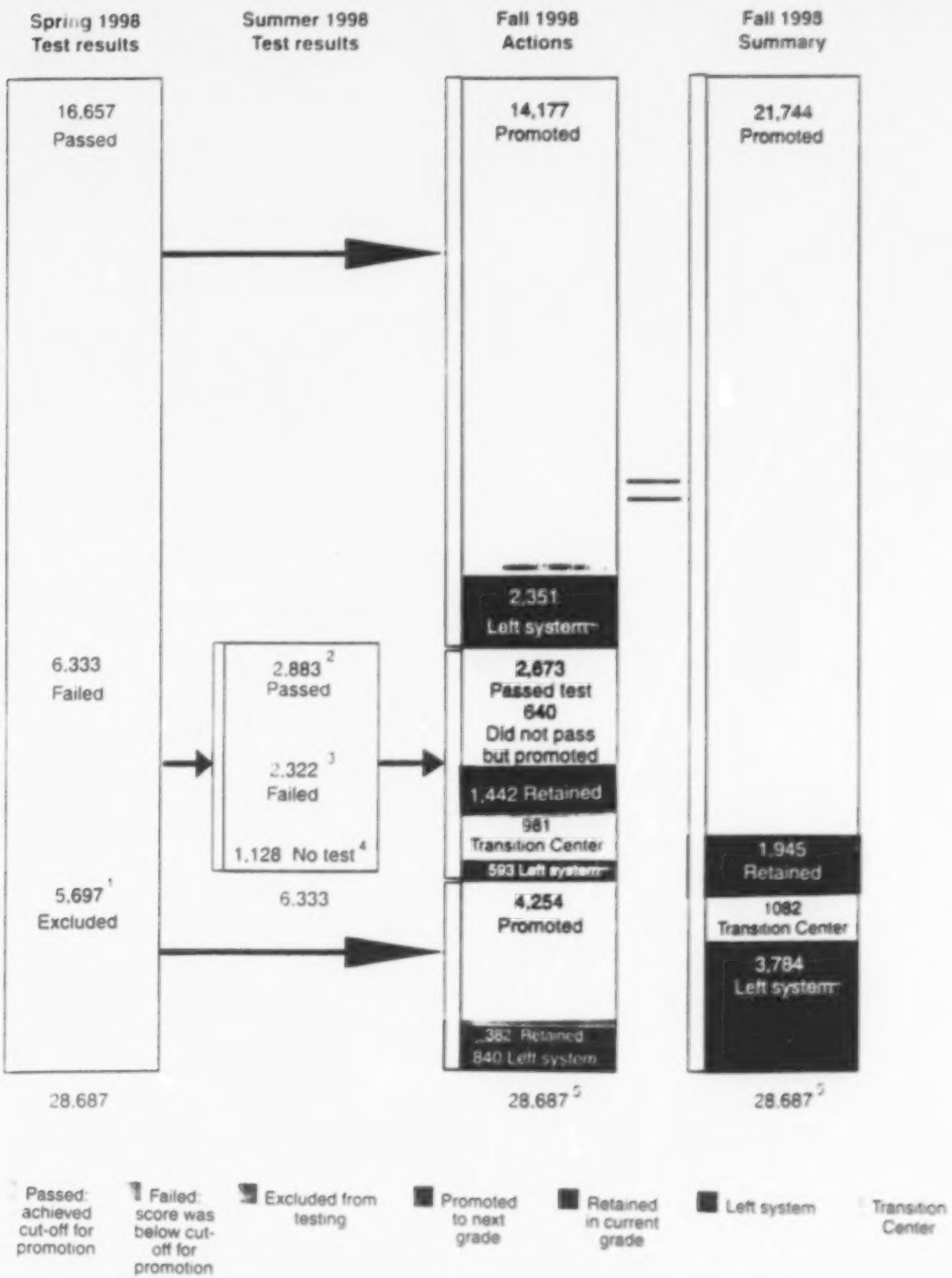
[3] 572 of the 2,789 students who failed Summer Bridge were promoted, 2,127 were retained, and 90 left the system.

[4] 537 of the 1,204 students who did not take the test in Summer Bridge were promoted, 506 were retained, 154 left the system, 6 moved into non-graded special education, and 1 entered a Transition Center.

[5] The numbers in this column do not add up to exactly 30,121 because 64 students moved into non-graded special education between the two semesters.

Figure C

Spring 1998 Test Results
First Time Eighth Graders



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Spring 1998 Test Results

First Time Eighth Graders

Details

[1] The excluded category includes students who took the test, but whose scores were excluded from reporting, and students who did not take the test. Of those students who took the test, the test scores of 4,033 students were excluded from reporting. Of these, 276 were bilingual, 3,738 were special education, and 19 were both bilingual and special education students. An additional 1,664 students did not take the test, perhaps because of special education or bilingual status.

[2] 2,673 of the 2,883 students who passed Summer Bridge in 1998 were promoted, 28 were retained, 181 left the system, and 1 entered a Transition Center.

[3] 145 of the 2,322 students who failed Summer Bridge were promoted, 1,150 were retained, 170 left the system, 1 moved into non-graded special education, and 856 entered Transition Centers.

[4] 495 of the 1,128 students who did not take the test in Summer Bridge were promoted, 264 were retained, 242 left the system, 3 moved into non-graded special education, and 124 entered Transition Centers.

[5] The numbers in this column do not add up to exactly 28,687 because 132 students moved into non-graded special education between the two semesters.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Melissa Roderick is an Associate Professor at the School of Social Service Administration at the University of Chicago and a co-director at the Consortium on Chicago School Research. Professor Roderick is the lead principal investigator of the Consortium's integrated program of research evaluating the effects of Chicago's efforts to end social promotion. She is an expert in urban minority adolescent development and urban high schools and has conducted research on school dropouts, truancy, and the effects of grade retention. Professor Roderick received a master's degree in public policy from the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, and a Ph.D. in public policy from Harvard's Graduate School of Arts and Sciences.

Anthony S. Bryk is the Director of the Center for School Improvement, Professor of Education and Sociology at the University of Chicago, and Senior Director of the Consortium. He received his B.S. from Boston College and his Ed.D. from Harvard University. Professor Bryk has developed new statistical methods in education that have contributed to studies of school effects. His research has investigated an array of educational programs for urban youth. Among his current interests are the social organization of schools and its effects, and school restructuring to improve student learning.

Brian A. Jacob is a research analyst at the Consortium and a doctoral student in public policy at the University of Chicago. His work has focused on developing statistical models to estimate the achievement effects of the retention policy. He is currently writing a dissertation that examines the variation in policy effects across students and schools. Mr. Jacob received his B.A. from Harvard University and worked as a middle school math teacher in New York City prior to joining the Consortium.

John Q. Easton is Deputy Director at the Consortium. He is the lead author of the first Consortium survey, *Charting Reform: The Teachers' Turn, 1991*, and a Research Data Brief, *Adjusting Citywide ITBS Scores for Student Retention in Grades Three, Six, and Eight*, 1998. Formerly, Mr. Easton was Director of Research, Analysis and Assessment in the Chicago Public Schools Office of Accountability. He received his Ph.D. in Measurement, Evaluation and Statistical Analysis from the Department of Education at the University of Chicago.

Elaine Allensworth is a Senior Research Associate at the Consortium. She received her M.A. in Sociology and Urban Studies and her Ph.D. in Sociology from Michigan State University. Prior to entering graduate school, she worked as a high school Spanish and science teacher. Ms. Allensworth has published articles and reports on an array of issues in education, immigration, and community development.

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This report reflects the interpretations of its authors. Although the Consortium's Steering Committee provided technical advice and reviewed an earlier version of this report, no formal endorsement by these individuals, their organizations, or the full Consortium should be assumed.

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James H. Lewis, Co-Chair
Roosevelt University

Rachel W. Lindsey, Co-Chair
Chicago State University

John Ayers
Leadership for Quality Education

Gina Burkhardt
North Central Regional Educational Laboratory

Tariq Butt, M.D.
Chicago Public Schools

Michael E. Carl
Northeastern Illinois University

Karen G. Carlson
Academic Accountability Council

Molly A. Carroll
Chicago Teachers Union

Victoria Chou
University of Illinois at Chicago

Anne C. Hallett
Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform

Philip Hansen
Chicago Public Schools

G. Alfred Hess, Jr.
Northwestern University

John K. Holton
Harvard School of Public Health

George Lowery
Roosevelt University

Angela Pérez Miller
DePaul University

Donald R. Moore
Designs for Change

Sharon Ransom
University of Illinois at Chicago

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DePaul University

Linda S. Tafel
National-Louis University

Beverly Tunney
Chicago Principals and Administrators Association

Paul G. Vallas
Chicago Public Schools

Connie Wise
Illinois State Board of Education

Consortium on Chicago School Research

Mission

The Consortium on Chicago School Research is an independent federation of Chicago area organizations that conducts research on ways to improve Chicago's public schools and assess the progress of school improvement and reform. Formed in 1990, it is a multipartisan organization that includes faculty from area universities, leadership from the Chicago Public Schools, the Chicago Teachers Union, education advocacy groups, the Illinois State Board of Education, and the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, as well as other key civic and professional leaders.

The Consortium does not argue a particular policy position. Rather, it believes that good policy is most likely to result from a genuine competition of ideas informed by the best evidence that can be obtained.

Directors

Anthony S. Bryk
University of Chicago

John Q. Easton
Consortium on Chicago School Research

Albert L. Bennett
Roosevelt University

Kay Kersch Kirkpatrick
Consortium on Chicago School Research

Melissa Roderick
University of Chicago

Penny Bender Sebring
University of Chicago

Mark A. Smylie
University of Illinois at Chicago

Consortium on Chicago School Research
1313 East 60th Street, Chicago, IL 60637
773-702-3364 773-702-2010 - fax
http://www.consortium-chicago.org